"Saved for What?"

James 2:14-26/Luke 10:25-37

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

Christian speaker and author Rob Bell begins his book *Love Wins* with this story. The story took place while Rob was the senior pastor of the Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"Several years ago we had an art show at our church. I had been giving a series of teachings on peacemaking, and we invited artists to display their paintings, poems, and sculptures that reflected their understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker. One woman included in her work a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, which a number of people found compelling.

"But not everyone. Someone attached a piece of paper to it. On the piece of paper was written: 'Reality check: Ghandi's not a Christian. He's in hell.'"

Rob Bell goes on to write: "Really? Ghandi's in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Someone knows this? Without a doubt? And that someone decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?"

The story raises the question about salvation and faith and God's grace. Some Christians believe they have the right, exact answers to the questions. And others see things a little more humbly and wider with grace.

Salvation. The topic came up at our men's breakfast a couple weeks ago. On the one hand Paul says, "A person is justified by faith, apart from works of the law" (Rom 3:28). But in our text from James today it says, "So faith, by itself, if it has not works, is dead" (James 2:17). So is it faith, or is it works? Is it belief or is it a way of life?

And what is salvation? Is it belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior so I can go to heaven? Or is it belief and a new way of life now that continues on past death in the glory of God? What do you think?

The reading from James this morning is in a particular style of Greek rhetoric called a diatribe. In a diatribe the speaker imagines someone raising questions or debating what is being said, and the speaker responds to the objections. It's a little like an imagined debate. To get the

feel for this, and to hear the text from James as intended, I've written a loose paraphrase of the text, emphasizing the back and forth. Heather will be James in the reading, and I'll be the imagined objector.

*(Appendix: Read James 2:14-26 as a paraphrase diatribe)

II. Brief Exegesis

It's a curious thing how pendulum swings work. When a pendulum swings way out on one side, it swings way out on the other side, too. It's type of balance. Energy in one direction becomes energy in the other direction. And of course that has become a type of metaphor. When something extreme happens in one direction you can count on something extreme happening in the other direction. All the tight cultural control of the 50s gave way to the rebellion of the 60s. The pendulum swing.

I think that's what's happening in this text in James 2. James is working very hard to emphasize the importance of works; the importance of Christian faith shaping a way of life. And I think he's doing that because the pendulum had swung way out with extreme "saved by faith alone." Some in the early church had taken the Apostle's Paul's teaching on saved by faith to the extreme. In fact, it's way beyond what Paul intended. Perhaps it was something like; "I'm saved by my faith. I've confessed Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I believe in my heart. Therefore, how I live doesn't really matter. It's all God's grace and my faith." I think that's the pendulum swing that James is addressing. So to address that extreme "saved by faith" we get extreme "faith without works is dead."

I know this can seem like the fine points of theology that have no bearing on real life, but it does make a difference. It makes a difference in what we believe and understand about God, Jesus Christ, Christian faith, and life. It mattered 2000 years ago. It's mattered for generations since then. It matters today. And it will matter into the future. And so often we struggle to get it right.

James begins with the church community argument. It appears there may have been some people in the church in need of food and clothes. But the response of some other church members is to greet them with a smile and a "God bless you, go in peace," but to not help out. James is clear; that type of Christian talk without the walk is dead faith.

Next he moves on to the theological argument. Just believing in one God doesn't make anyone a Christian. Demons know there's a God. But they don't live in God's ways. And we would never call them "Christian." Faith without works is like that. Real faith that saves is demonstrated in God's way of life.

The biblical argument is next. The biblical characters Abraham and Rahab are mentioned and their stories are remembered. And both are examples of faith in God, which is demonstrated in choices that showed they trusted God. Their faith shaped their lives. And interestingly, the

Abraham and Rahab stories are also told as examples of hospitality. So James may also be saying that faith includes extending hospitality.

Finally, James concludes his argument with an example from life. The body without the spirit, or life force, or breath of God is dead. It's just a body. Everyone knows that. Likewise, faith without works is just like that body, dead.

In the familiar story in Luke 10 we get the same beliefs about faith, salvation ,and God. The Bible scholar who talks to Jesus is happy just to keep faith to right answers and good ideas. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. But Jesus pushes him to more. The faithfulness that loves God and neighbor doesn't just have the right answers and pass by on the other side. The faithfulness that loves God and neighbor stops and helps. Faithfulness that is salvation and love is about a way of life. So Jesus says, "Go and DO likewise."

III. Brief Theological Reflection

I like Charlie Brown comics. I always have. In one comic strip Lucy is sitting in a bean bag chair watching television. She calls to Charlie Brown, "Charlie Brown, could you bring me a bowl of mint ice cream." In the next frame you see Charlie Brown bringing Lucy a bowl of mint ice cream. In the next frame you see Lucy with a stunned look on her face, and calling to Charlie Brown, "Hey, this mint ice cream tastes funny." And in the last frame you see Charlie Brown saying, "It's amazing what you can do with plain vanilla ice cream and a green felt tip marker."

What is real? And what only looks real, but tastes funny? That's what James is passionate about in this text. And the issue is not ice cream, but what's real about Christian faith.

Faith and works. Some have taken Paul's "saved by faith" to the extreme, so James takes "works" to the extreme. But the truth is, really it's both. Salvation is hanging on to both faith and works at the same time, two things that seem in dynamic tension with each other. On the one hand it's, "For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jh. 3:16-17). That's faith. It's trusting the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ.

And on the other hand, it's "Love the Lord your God with your heart, mind, soul, and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself" Lk. 10: 27). That's works. It's action. It's a way of life. It's responding to the grace of God in Jesus Christ by loving God and neighbor. Salvation in Christian faith is holding onto both "For God so loved the world," and "Love God and your neighbor." It's not one or the other. It's both, at the same time.

Vanilla ice cream colored with a green marker; it may look real, but it's not. And it tastes funny. So is Christian faith when salvation falls to only one side; faith or works. It may look real, but it's not. And it tastes funny. Rather salvation is faith and works, happening together in our lives. It's both a gift of God's grace and a way of life. That's real mint ice cream.

IV. Appendix

Regular type—Objector Bold Type—James

Saved by faith alone. I have faith and don't worry about works. **Faith without works? Is that really Christian faith? Do you believe faith will save you?**

Sure…saved by faith alone. That's the Apostle Paul. It's all I need. **Well, suppose you see someone in need, someone needing clothes or food. And you say "May God bless you," and you wish them warmth and food…but you do nothing to help. Does that sound like Christian faith to you? That kind of faith, if you can call it faith, without works, is dead.**

I have faith, and you…well you have works. Isn't that right? **Nonsense. Can you show me your faith without works? Of course not. But with my works I can show you my faith.**

Do you believe in one God, THE one God? Absolutely. That's the center of my faith; belief in the one God. **Well, that's good. But it's no big deal. Even demons believe in God and that doesn't save them. Simply believing in God isn't Christian faith.**

Let me tell you a little more. Faith without works is empty, barren, and not Christian faith. Well, what about Abraham? It says in Genesis 15 that "Abraham believed in God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Abraham was in right relationship with God by belief…by faith alone. **And what's the rest of the story. By faith Abraham trusted God and went to a distant land. By faith Abraham trusted that God would give him descendants and a land. By faith Abrahem even offered his only son Isaac to God when God asked. His faith was seen in his works.**

And do you want more? What about the woman Rahab? I know, I know…she believed the Hebrew spies when they came to Jericho. And she hid them and helped them escape. And then when Jericho fell she and her family were saved. Faith and works, right?

Yep, that's right. That's Christian faith. That's faith that saves. It's about now and the future. It's about earth and heaven. One last illustration, OK? Sure, why not? **Think about our bodies. Our bodies without the spirit, without the breath of God, without the mystery of life…are dead. Dead bodies are not living, they are dead. So it is with faith; without works faith is dead.**

I get it; salvation is faith and works, belief that shapes my life.