

24th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (September 13, 2009)
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Have you ever been hit with the question: “Are you saved?” Let’s say you are relaxing at your home on a Sunday afternoon (watching the first games of the new football season, perhaps...); the doorbell rings, and you are met with a bright, friendly young person who asks ‘are you saved?’ How do you answer? Assuming you resist the temptation to slam the door in the person’s face, you may find yourself unsure of how to respond. Or, if you get that question at an extremely hectic time, you might respond like the mother of a large family who was visited one hot summer day by two missionaries. To get to the door, they had to make their way through a number of very active and noisy children, not to mention the barking dogs. When they knocked on the door, the woman stopped her housework, brushed the hair and sweat from her face and asked what they wanted. The zealous missionaries answered: “We’d like to tell you how to obtain eternal life.” The tired homemaker paused and then replied “thank you anyway, but I don’t believe I could stand it!” I’ll bet we’ve all had days like that, right?

But let’s go back to that original question: ‘are you saved?’ A very important question, to be sure. Another way to put it: do you think you are going to heaven? If so, why? What makes you confident in your response? This question of salvation and how it is achieved is very much at the heart of today’s second reading from the letter of St. James. Last week we heard James address God’s equal love for everyone, rich and poor alike, and how that helps build the Church’s social teachings. Today we hear this apostle address another important and related issue—how that social teaching relates to eternal salvation. Specifically, James emphasizes the need for consistency between the faith claimed by one who is Christian and how the person actually lives out that faith. This is the classic question of the proper relationship between faith and works as they relate to the question of salvation.

This question of faith and works, in fact, was one of the main issues that led to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century and Martin Luther’s break with the Catholic Church. I cannot go into all the historical details of how that break came about at this time; suffice it to say that everyone agreed that faith in Christ was essential to one’s salvation—the dispute arose with the issue of how our good works or actions help us toward salvation, if they help at all. Luther had come to focus on Paul’s letter to the Romans that said “the just shall live by faith”. Paul refers here to justification--the way in which the sinner is forgiven by the love of God through Jesus Christ and is re-created in the state of grace and oneness with God. But Luther then took a big step from that statement in Romans (‘the just shall live by faith’) to claim that justification is accomplished by faith alone; he believed that good works are of no value for one’s salvation. We should not take this to mean that Luther said it was perfectly OK to sin or that people should not do good works; he simply thought that our good deeds were irrelevant to the question of our salvation.

But that ‘faith alone’ approach seems to fly directly in the face of what we heard from the letter of James, doesn’t it? Listen again to his words: “What good is it...if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” Later on, James is even more blunt in saying that faith by itself, if not supported by the work of charity, “is dead.” As you might expect, Luther had some serious difficulty with the letter of St. James, referring to it once as ‘an epistle of straw.’

And if James doesn’t convince us that we must act out our faith and not just profess it with our lips, then maybe the words of Jesus himself will convince us:

--in Matthew (ch. 7): “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” Only the one who does the will of God, only the one whose faith is active and living and does something, will be saved.

--and how can we forget that sobering Last Judgment scene from Matthew 25? Those who acted (feeding the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned, and so on)—they are the ones

who inherit everlasting life. On the other hand, those who refused to reach out beyond themselves to those in need, those who did not put into living practice the faith they claimed for themselves, will go to eternal punishment. Tough words, to be sure, but they are Jesus' words—not mine.

So it is clear that the Bible and the Church spell out the truth about our salvation. On the one hand, we can do nothing to earn or merit salvation by our efforts alone. It is sheer, free, undeserved gift to us from our incredibly loving God. We are saved, we are justified first and foremost by the pure grace of God through the infinite merits and worth of Jesus Christ and what he accomplished for us through his suffering, death and resurrection. That grace, that gift comes from God; he simply and lovingly invites us—he thirsts for us—to accept that gift in thanks and in faith. Faith is indeed absolutely essential...

But faith by itself is not sufficient. We are also called to act on that faith, to reach out beyond ourselves in love to God and to our neighbors—whether they live next door or halfway around the world. We celebrate our faith here at Mass; we live our faith the rest of the week. In the gospel Jesus challenged the apostles with the question “Who do you say that I am?” That question is addressed to each of us as well, and we answer that question certainly with our words, our profession of faith in Jesus—but we answer it by our deeds as well, by how we live out that faith we profess. And there are so many ways to do so:

- being willing to talk with others about God, his truth, and what he has done for you;
- spending a little extra time with your spouse, children, parents, someone who is ill or lonely, and doing so simply because you love them;
- contributing your time, talent and treasure to various needs and good causes (there is certainly no shortage of them);
- spending a little extra time with God throughout the day and week in prayer.

At the time of Martin Luther and the Reformation, there was little if any helpful communication between the two sides. Positions hardened, the debates became acrimonious and condemnations were hurled back and forth; it was hardly a time of respectful ecumenical relations (to say the least). It is interesting and encouraging to note that in recent years, the Catholic Church has been in thoughtful and prayerful dialogue with our Lutheran brothers and sisters on this critical question of how we are justified, how we come to salvation. A happy result of those conversations has been the realization that there is more common ground between our communions than was thought to be the case. We are certainly not in full and complete agreement, but we are surely at a better place than we were before. Pope Benedict could even say in one of his audiences late last year that “Luther’s expression *sola fide* [faith alone] is true if faith is not opposed to charity, to love”. Note the Holy Father’s pastoral desire to incorporate Luther’s understanding into the fact that faith, to be true and living, must show itself active in charity and love.

I’d like to leave us all with a challenge: each night before you go to bed, look back over the day and call to mind at least two or three ways you acted on your faith. And be specific: don’t let yourself off the hook with a generic ‘well, I was nice to people’, but recall something concrete you said or did for the benefit of someone else or that helped strengthen your love for Jesus and your life of Christian discipleship. After you thought of those two or three things, then thank God for the grace to have done so, to have lived your faith as St. James challenges us. And if you can’t think of two or three (or even one!) way that you lived your faith that day, then tell God you are sorry...and then promise to act on God’s grace so as to do better tomorrow.