

“Kierkegaard’s Geese”

Dr. D. Jay Losher

9 September 2018 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church

Mark 7:24-30 + James 2:14-17 = faith and works

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian thinker, wrote a whole essay using a flock of geese as a metaphor for the church.¹ In it he tells this parable:



Into a barnyard full of geese flies a preaching goose. He is an eloquent preacher, inspiring the geese on how they were given wings to fly. Their forbearers flew off into the great sky above, so numerous they darkened the sun. He speaks of all there is to see out in the wide world beyond their barnyard ~ woods and fields and mountains and magnificence beyond imagination.



The geese think he is a wonderful preacher. They nod, say amen, applaud this preaching goose. They analyze and critically evaluate his doctrines. They produce learned treatises on the ethical and spiritual implications of flight. One thing they don't do, they don't fly. The barnyard walls are high and secure and the corn is plentiful, so they continue to waddle rather than fly.



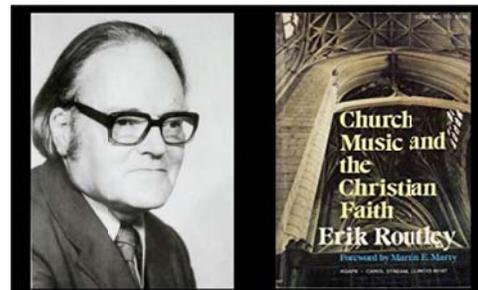
Kierkegaard's parable illustrates perfectly the James text today:



“Faith without works is dead.”²

Or as Jill Duffield says in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, our texts today are “Christianity 101 ... basic instruction[s] for being a decent human being.”³

Erik Routley, my widely respected hymnology professor, was a wise mentor. He said of sermon preparation that until one has searched the scriptures diligently, found the scripture (and there always is one) that says the exact opposite, and reconciled the two, then and only then is one ready to preach that passage.



James' text, "Faith without works is dead." does have its polar opposite in Paul:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."
[Ephesians 2:8]

"For by grace you have been saved through faith"
Ephesians 2:8

"a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ"
Galatians 2:16

And Paul takes issue with James:

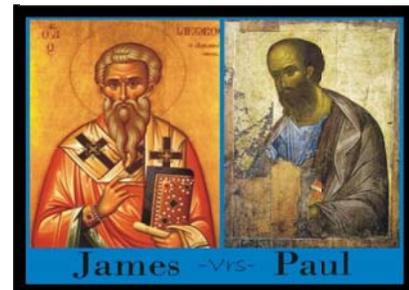
"We know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ"
[Galatians 2:16]

James today in verse 22 just past our reading uses Abraham as the prime example of works-righteousness:

"Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?"⁴

While at the same time Paul in Romans 4 uses Abraham as the perfect example of salvation by faith alone.⁵

Both James and Paul use the same example of Abraham but to opposite conclusions: James to prove faith is only made real in works. Paul to prove faith saves completely apart from works. There we've got our opposites for the morning.



Which is right? Truth, God's truth is they are both right, though partial. Our human logic makes them seem incompatible. But God's truth is most often a paradox, that is, it transcends human logic. As another of my professors, Bruce Metzger, once said of these two seeming opposites:

"Salvation is by faith alone, but the grace that saves is not alone."
Bruce Metzger

"Salvation is by faith alone, but the grace that saves is not alone."

Meaning that having experienced God's grace, in gratitude we naturally endeavor to do good works. The fruit of salvation is in living better lives.

Both Paul and James would agree: talking the talk is not enough; that sometime sooner, not later those geese need to get up and fly rather than hanging perpetually in the amen corner, time to fish rather than just talking about it.

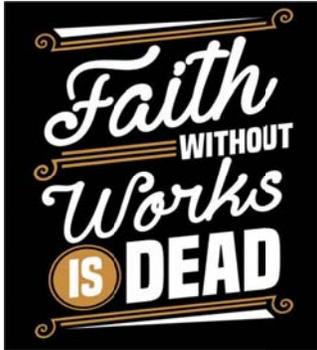
Turning to Mark where Jesus meets the Syrophenician woman, the faith versus works conundrum is alive and well. Jesus has just come from a food fight, a draining exchange with the Pharisees as we saw last Sunday. In exasperation Jesus had exclaimed:



“there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile”⁶

The next logical step is: **“and the good things which come out save us.”** So Jesus would seem to agree with **“faith without works is dead”** as James says.

Jesus condemns the corruption of the Pharisees,⁷ a condemnation which undoubtedly includes their bigotry, yet here with the Syrophenician woman, Jesus seems to become a mouthpiece for the same Judeo-centric bigotry as the Pharisees.



The Phoenician woman from Syria approaches Jesus to heal her daughter and Jesus calls her a ‘gentile dog!’ How can he say that? This is a side of Jesus that is totally out of character and we have a hard time comprehending. A number of explanations have been offered. One of the more reasonable is that Jesus himself is wrestling with how wide and how inclusive is God’s mission.



Jesus is tired, bone tired after his long running dispute with Israel’s leaders. He has fled to the gentile region of Tyre for a respite to get away from all the crowds. He was in need of rest, a vacation, but his reputation having proceeded him, the crowds, now of gentiles, follow him everywhere.

The woman’s challenge to Jesus is “show me some of that faith-filled, life-giving works like you did over in Israel.” “Show me you can walk the walk, not just talk the talk.” “Stop talking about flying and take off.” So as Jesus is wrestling with whether the kingdom of God extends to the gentiles, he is drawn rather reluctantly into a “yes.”



After healing the daughter, the precedent now set that the reign of God extends even to the ends of the earth, Jesus passes through the region in a healing and

preaching mission among the gentiles. He astounds the inhabitants with his words and his deeds.

For us as well as Jesus: faith outpouring in works breeds awe and astonishment, breeds more faith.

We have seen how Kierkegaard's geese waddle home, never fly and never actualize their faith. We have also seen how Erik Routley encourages us to find an opposite parable to balance that cynical outcome for the allegory.

In sharp contrast to the geese in Kierkegaard's fable, the movie *Chicken Run* tells the same parable but with a different ending. In *Chicken Run* an itinerant circus rooster lands by accident in an egg farm, actually a concentration camp. The hens have a whole different attitude than the geese. They are convinced the rooster can fly and beg him to teach them. Yet chickens are flightless birds and always will be.



In the end, none of them can actually fly, but their faith in flying and their desire to escape is so strong that they build an airplane and they do escape. Both these parables illustrate perfectly the James text today: **“Faith without works is dead.”** If the flightless chickens in *Chicken Run* can figure out a way to fly, so should the flightworthy geese find it even easier to soar.

As Jill Duffield says quite rightly about our texts today, that they are “Christianity 101 ... basic instruction[s] for being a decent human being.”⁸



May we not be like those flightworthy geese who refuse to fly. May we be the flightless chickens who overcome every reluctance and impediment to actually soar, because our faith is so strong and our certainty so deep that true faith becomes actualized in righteous

works. We are not saved by our works, but rather “Salvation is by faith alone, but the grace that saves is not alone.”

“Salvation is by faith alone,
but the grace that saves is
not alone.”

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Tame Geese*

² James 2:17 paraphrase

³ Jill Duffield, <https://pres-outlook.org/2018/09/16th-sunday-after-pentecost-september-9-2018/>

⁴ James 2:22

⁵ Genesis 15:6

⁶ Mark 7:15

⁷ Mark 8:11-12

⁸ Jill Duffield, *op.cit.*