

The Chicken or the Egg?

Text: Psalm 90: 16-17; James 1: 22-25; 2: 14-18, 24

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Elliott spoke just a bit ago to the kids and all of us about building an ark. It's a fabulous way to support Heifer Project International and to boost their efforts to provide livestock around the world that are struggling to break the cycle of hunger.

You might recall that when we did this a few years ago it included having Diane and Frankie worship with us. Diana was a chicken and Frankie a goat - and they came as examples of the kinds of animals who will produce and reproduce toward that effort.

Well, one of you cornered me after church that day and affectionately teased me (unrelentingly) with the age-old riddle about the chicken and the egg. "So tell me Dr. Campbell. Which came first? Diana or her egg?"

I responded brilliantly. "Well, that depends on whether you listen to Aristotle, Plutarch, Macrobius or the Bible." "Whoa!" you sported back, "I was only kidding." To which I continued, "All silliness aside, you raise an ancient paradox of origin. The chicken and the egg conundrum pose the dilemma of first cause, only to lead to an infinite sequence of wondering." I was on a roll! But, mercifully, I stopped there. And my yet undisclosed friend was speechless!

Stay playful but step deeper with me. Let's hold that ancient paradox in one hand as we and add another to the conversation. And, this too, opens up an infinite sequence that could take us around and around till the cows come home.

When it comes to following Jesus what comes first: faith or works? Does what we believe in our minds and hearts first take hold of us and then lead us to compassionate deeds; or is it the other way around, that it is the doing of benevolent deeds that opens us to new ways of thinking and believing? It's an age-old conundrum of the chicken and egg variety!

Our scripture lesson today plops us right in the middle of it. It comes to us through a first century mailbox and a letter that James has written. According to some scholars, James was the brother of Jesus. And, as the early church developed, he wrote a corrective to counter something that Paul had said in yet another letter to the church at Rome about faith being preeminent over works.

But James argued back at Paul with irrevocable certainty: "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. Indeed, faith apart from works is barren. Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, lest you deceive yourselves." On point. Show me then I'll listen. Not to oversimplify here. It would be a disservice to both Paul and James to make the matter so binary. Neither argued from mutually exclusive positions.¹ And both would agree that

the faith in our hearts and the works of our hands are inseparable and inextricably a part of discipleship.

But let's bring it closer than a squabble between James and Paul. Because the tension between works and faith, action and contemplation, faith in the soul and benevolence on the street, inner life and outer life, devotion and justice, are not only about ancient times. Not by a long shot. Human-merely-being as we are, it comes as close as this room.

I've a friend who is absolutely driven to do good for others and to contribute to the repairing of the earth. He rarely misses a beat in doing so. He simply does what's right and good because it needs to be done. He believes that if faith is not embodied on the front lines of the urgent matters of the day it has little value to add. But that often leaves him feeling alone and angry at the magnitude of the needs before him – and the fact that others see him as dutiful in works without the devotion of faith. Sometimes I wonder if a little bit of time nourishing his soul might help him resolve that.

I've another friend whose passion is the inner life of the Spirit for which she shows deep devotion and affinity. She speaks often of contemplative prayer. It's honestly second nature to her. "Always start with your own heart," she says. As a result, her strong suit is the inner peace of faith - and yet there is a haunting in her most honest moments. Paradoxically her devoted prayer life has served to insulate her from the world. She worries about that in herself. Sometimes I wonder if a little bit more time with boots-on-the-ground might empower her more.

These two friends, both of whom I love, live in real-time. They are here. They are not separate from one another. They live somewhere in all of us. And they illustrate, maybe even caricature the point at center for us this morning.

Do you remember? Which came first: Diana the chicken or her egg? (Don't dismiss it as simplistic!) Paul and James merely started the conversation for us.

So let me ask a few questions to bring us to close.

Are good works the origin of your faith (as James suggests), or is faith the first cause in your compassion for others?

Are you one who talks the talk as has been coined, or one who is more likely to walk the walk - even knowing that these two can never really be separate?

Do you know the interface and balance within yourself between your devotional life on the one hand, and the ethical imperatives of your faith on the other?

Do you have a sense for how these play out on the field of your own life in real-time? Does faith precede and then drive your desire to do good, or does your doing good lead and compel you to faith?

Do you act yourself into new and deeper ways of believing and thinking; or do you believe and think yourselves into new initiatives and actions of service?

Or, perchance, are they both inseparable as the side of one coin?

There is an old a stone statue in the center of Strasbourg, France. It portrays Jesus in a gesture of pure hospitality with his arms outstretched to welcome all. The original plaque said, "My heart extends to all."

But, one night toward the end of WWII, the town was shelled and the hands of Jesus were sheared off by a falling beam. The townspeople searched through the rubble but the hands of Christ were hopelessly gone. How they keep the statue? A savior without hands would never do. But someone had an idea. A new plaque was carved: "My heart extends to all. My hands are your hands."

It may be of further interest to say that some version of this story circulates about a churchyard in England, a cathedral in Germany and a hamlet in North Africa. This does not diminish its value rather it helps us in moving from the particular to the universal. Following Jesus is never solely a matter of one over the other: the works of our hands versus the faith in our hearts. It's always both/and and never either/or.²

I don't think anything could say it any better than the image of that statue. And I don't think I need to say anymore. Amen.

Amen.

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¹ Ronald D. Witherup. [101 Questions and Answers on Paul](#). Paulist Press, 2003, pp. 129-132.

² Google 2018: search for Blog: Pitterle Postings.