

You're Already There
Lake Street Church of Evanston
Rev. Michael Woolf
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It is no secret that Martin Luther was not exactly a fan of the Epistle of James. Some of you may know that this is a book that says the phrase “faith without works is dead,” and it is a hard-driving book about the sorts of things that our faith demand of us. Luther was, to put it mildly, not feeling it. He put it last in his Bible, called it an “epistle of straw,” and when he did eventually print it, he put the phrase “this is not holy writ.” This was because Luther spent his whole life railing against what he would go on to call – work’s righteousness. That’s the idea that you can earn your salvation, that somehow you can be good enough to merit God’s love. Instead, the alternative of course is that God already loves you and has from the start.

So, ok – we might not be exactly moved by discussions of work’s righteousness and what can get you into heaven – I can already tell by the glazed looks some of you are giving me that you’re ready to check out, but give me a minute - but I think this idea of striving constantly to attain one’s goals is pretty applicable to this area. I spent some time in Cambridge, MA, and I recognize a lot of the same over-programming, exhaustion, and striving. It’s a point of pride to say that you are busy because it means that your time is valuable and people want it. But it would be a mistake to carry that sort of striving for attainment to your spiritual life. Luther would call that work’s righteousness, but I would just say it’s ineffective.

Much of what we know about spirituality centers on the fact that if you apply the same rules of career and success to it, you will wind up pretty frustrated. It is almost like wanting to attain a deeper connection with God, wanting to be better at prayer, wanting to be spiritual is somewhat of a disqualifier for attaining those goals. We reach out our hands and we expect to lay hold of what we seek, but it slips out of our fingers. We put our nets expecting the BIG haul, and we come back with 2 cans of pork and beans and a toilet seat, like that scene in Forest Gump when they are learning to fish for shrimp. We try too hard and come away disappointed.

And yet the truth is that we come away disappointed because we already had that which we sought. We have always been the beloved of God, we have always been sufficient, we have always been worthy of love and care and attention. We have always deserved to be seen and counted. We have always deserved to tell our stories and be listened to. We have always been loved recklessly and endlessly by that which lies at the center of all things.

It’s just easy to miss that bit isn’t it? Luther wasn’t just making some strange theological point that has no relevance, he was reminding us that we already had everything we needed at the start. Of course, sometimes you have to wander about a bit before you really know that.

Sometimes you have to try to make yourself deserving of love, before you find out that you were beloved the whole time. Sometimes you have to set off on a great adventure to discover that you were seeking what you already had this whole time. That it was within you.

And so when I hear Jesus say that the Kingdom of God is within us, that the heavenly reign is in us, that's God's peace is in us, that the beloved community is in each and every one of us, I hear a divine call for us to recognize that we already have all we need, that God's love if it comes into the world will come through us, that if God's love is to be made manifest in the here and now, it will come through these frail human vessels that are simultaneously capable of astounding bursts of light.

The human condition is strange. Ha Levi said that "it is a fearful thing to love what death can touch," and so it is. And yet I think it is because death can touch us, that we can die, that we also have the ability to gain insight into the center of all things. In some parts of Buddhism, there is this wonderful idea that those reincarnated as gods live out sad existences. Because they have such long lives, and because they can make little progress on the path to enlightenment. You see enlightenment is a knowledge granted only to the human, only attained by those that death can touch.

And so, I just want to take a moment to take stock of our situation. We are human beings with relatively short times on this earth, but we have within us this astounding capacity to know God, to know love. What a gift. It was not something to be striven for or attained through great merit. It was baked into being human.

So, you, if you are exhausted. I want to tell you that you are enough. If you are angry this morning, you are also enough. If you are grieving, you are enough. IF you're bored of this sermon, you need to leave sir. No – just kidding, you are also enough. Sit back, take a breath and let the wonder in. You are enough, you are beloved.

It may be tempting to break out your spiritual compass, prepare for a long journey, save in your bank account for the difficult adventure, but the collective wisdom of the ages says that you're already there. No need to travel. Now, if you want to, that's cool too. But you're already there. You've been there since the very moment you came into being and nothing you can do can take you out of the center of that love. Now folks, if that is not the good news this morning, then I have absolutely no clue what is. Blessed be.