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I'm sure that you've heard the riddle about several blind folks who encounter an unknown creature. One runs into it and says that it is a wall. Another reaches out and proclaims that it is a spear. The others chime with what they feel: a snake, a tree, a fan, a rope. The riddle's answer is that the odd creature is an elephant. Each one perceives that it is only one part of its whole.¹

Often the Christian faith is described like this elephant. Different scripture readings – and branches of our Christian tradition – focus on one thing over another. They describe the elephant's trunk instead of its legs. When we put them next to each other, it sounds like they are speaking of two entirely different creatures. Our scripture readings today offer just such a contrast!

In the Lutheran tradition, we spend more energy focused on God's promises and gift of grace. A couple of our readings today give beautiful descriptions of that grace.

The prophet Isaiah tells of God's promise to restore Israel. Earlier in the book, Isaiah speaks God's judgment on what is wrong with its way of life. Yet chapter 35

¹ <http://www.iksynod.org/ministry/Epistle/julyepistle09.pdf>, 09/05/2009.

is respite from the judgment. The same God who gave the law and who judges humanity will redeem Israel. We tend to think of redemption – or salvation – as theoretical. But the prophet’s language is incredibly concrete:

“... [T]he eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy...
Streams... [shall break forth] in the desert.” (*Isa 35:5-6*)

These clear handicaps are physical examples of our brokenness as people. What is broken will become whole! What is parched will be filled with life! God promises a dramatic restoration of life at its best. It is tangible grace. Real salvation from whatever prisons contain our lives.

At the foundation of this passage in Isaiah, faith in God means trusting in this coming redemption. Faith is looking forward to the transformation of the lives of the faithful.

Our gospel picks up where this Jewish text ends. Mark describes Jesus, who embodies this Jewish promise. He casts out demons, even for a persistent Gentile. He helps a deaf man to hear once again. Jesus Christ fulfills Jewish expectations of God’s blessing intended for the faithful.

We hear Isaiah's and Mark's promise as also given to us. Like the Syrophenician woman, we are not Jewish and yet we receive God's grace. Like all of humanity, we are broken. Seeking to become whole. Longing for an abundant life, which only Christ's Spirit can offer.

Yet, just as an elephant's trunk is not the whole elephant – receiving God's grace is not all of the Christian life. The letter from James jolts us with another aspect of our faith. It agrees with Isaiah and Mark about what faith is: to believe in Jesus, is to trust in God's blessing for the poor, broken, and oppressed.

But James focuses on what comes next. The letter articulates expectations that come with the grace that we receive. Faith is not only intellectual or emotional belief. The trust that we have in God's Word leads us to new behaviors. Baptism into Jesus Christ recreates us to live as the people of God. Baptism leads us to live in service to our neighbors. As members of Christ's body, we share God's tangible grace with all our neighbors in need.

Although James was not Martin Luther's favorite letter, its basis fits into Luther's own teachings. His writings describe himself as the "doctor of good works." In his mind, to have Christian faith automatically meant that one did good

works. Faith was not a “belief”, but it was trust that was bound up with a way of life. It included a new orientation for our lives: serving all the neighbors around us.

Sure, we all know this. Unfortunately, it is not as easy as we would hope! James criticizes his readers for the ways that they fail to live God’s grace. They show favoritism in their own lives. They honor the rich and ignore the poor. They have been participating in a popularity contest, which they should have been ignoring. The fact is that we all do this in some way. Even the best of us usually has a category of people that we don’t think much of – based on age, appearance, occupation. It translates directly to how we treat them. Perhaps we’re not mean or rude (though sometimes we are). But we don’t reach out in kindness or generosity, when we would with others.

This is not just about individual sin. Our news is filled with celebrity and politician scandals, while people go hungry or suffer. Right now our country is trying to change how health care works. I am sure we could have a lively discussion about what should be done. Regardless of the details, our lawmakers want to fix our system, so that we no longer shower expensive care upon the wealthy, while we leave the poor to suffer. Our current, unjust reality convicts us by God’s commandment that we love our neighbor. We, too, share guilt in our society’s sin.

James' text sounds demanding – and it is! He asks us, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?” (*James 2:14*)

This is because Jesus Christ has given us his Spirit of power – and a tall order to fill. The good news of this text is that we are messengers of good news for our neighbors! Like Martin Luther, James encourages us to be ministers to all the neighbors around us. We are to serve them, in small and large ways. We are to share tangible grace with them, in our normal lives. And it's not about money at all. None of us need to be rich to journey with our friends in need.

Ultimately, these pictures of what is central to our faith are the same creature. God promises restoration and wholeness to the poor, the oppressed, and all who are broken. And God promises and expects that we participate in offering grace and love to our neighbors. We receive the body of Christ at the altar – and we go out as Christ's hands in the world today.