

GO WHERE YOU'RE LOOKING

September 13, 2009 – 8 o'clock Chapel Service

Text – Isaiah 50: 4 - 9a
James 2: 14 - 26

Two professors were walking on campus. One was nearsighted, and thus walked with his eyes cast down, scanning the path immediately in front of him for obstacles. The other was farsighted, and strolled with his head erect, scanning the distance. Seeing his approaching colleague on the right-hand side of the path, the farsighted man set his course to pass by his colleague on the left. At the last minute, however, his nearsighted friend spied a crack in the pavement and veered to avoid it. The two collided in a heap.

“Why don't you watch where you're going!” the nearsighted man exclaimed.

“Why don't you go where you're watching!” the other replied.

Our New Testament lesson speaks for the second man. “*Show me your faith apart from your works,*” James writes, “*and I by my works will show you my faith.*” (James 2: 18) He wants us to go where we're looking, to show our faith by our works, to walk our talk.

I was reminded this week of a little book entitled Letters to My Children by Daniel Taylor.¹ It's a collection of short stories through which Taylor tries to pass on his values to his children. In one chapter which he titles “What Price Popularity?” he tells of a time in the sixth grade when the boys were lined up along one wall of the cafeteria and the girls were made to stand in another line facing them along the opposite wall. They were there to learn square dancing, Taylor says, and the boys were supposed to choose the girls they would partner with. (Did they do this to you when you were in Middle School, or Junior High? They did to me.) The boys and girls equally hated the ritual, Taylor writes, but one of his classmates named Mary suffered the most.

“Mary was a girl who sat up near the front on the right-hand side,” he writes. “She wasn't pretty. She wasn't real smart. She wasn't witty. She was nice, but that wasn't enough in those days. And Mary certainly wasn't athletic.” In fact, he says, she had polio when she was small, and it left her with an arm and leg that did not function well.

One day Miss Owens, the student teacher, took Dan aside and said, “Dan, the next time we have square dancing, I want you to choose Mary.” The idea was inconceivable. To pick someone other than the most popular and prettiest? Taylor adds that Miss Owens told him it would be “the Christian thing to do.”

“I agonized,” he says. Then he decided that if he were the last in line, then Mary would be the only one left and he would dance with her automatically and everything would be okay. Instead, for some unknown reason, the teacher put him first in line.

Into the cafeteria they went. Boys lined up. Girls lined up. “Okay, Dan,” the teacher said, “choose your partner!” He chose Mary. “Never has reluctant virtue been so rewarded,” he writes.

“I still see her face undimmed in my memory. She lifted her head, and on her face, reddened with pleasure and surprise and

¹ Daniel Taylor, Letters to My Children: A Father Passes on His Values (Bog Walk Press, 2005), pp. 15ff.

embarrassment all at once, was the most genuine look of delight and even pride that I have ever seen, before or since. It was so pure that I had to look away because I knew I didn't deserve it. Linda and Shelly came up to me later,"

Taylor continues,

"and, in a catty kind of way, said, 'Miss Owens made you do that, didn't she?' I said no. And I wasn't lying. Miss Owens didn't make me do it. She had asked me to do it. She had told me I should. But I had chosen Mary. And I was glad."

"Mary is my age now," Taylor concludes. "I never saw her after that year. I don't know what her life's been like or what she's doing. But I'd like to think she has a fond memory of at least one day in the sixth grade. I know I do."

Dan Taylor "walked the talk" that day long ago, and never forgot it. Have you taken that walk yourself? Or have you been so busy watching where you're going, that you've forgotten to go where you're watching?

"Faith by itself, if it has no works," James writes, *"is dead."* [James 2: 17] The gift of a warm coat or a hot meal has more to do with spiritual truth and eternal life, he says quite pointedly, than all of the theological jargon in the world. Two thousand years later his words still ring with truth.

"By my works I will show you my faith," James says. When I was a young man, this was a favorite passage of mine. With it I fashioned a weapon to attack all of those publicly religious persons and organizations which failed to measure up to my standard of moral righteousness (to say nothing of political correctness). When challenged to adopt traditional forms and expressions of piety, I drew on the words of James for comfort and support.

That was then; this is now. Now I am the one who stands as a publicly religious person in your presence. Now I am the advocate of faith as the touchstone for all that we do. James' words come at me now like a guided missile. Do my works show forth my faith, day by day? Do yours? Maybe sometimes . . . hopefully sometimes . . ., but every day? It seems an impossible standard by which to be judged, but is it really?

Irina Ratushinskaya is a Russian poet and novelist. In 1982, at the age of 28, she was arrested and sentenced to seven years of hard labor for having the indecency to write what was considered to be anti-Soviet poetry. Her husband wryly commented, "Irina was found guilty of harboring 'an unenthusiastic way of thinking.'" Four years later, after an international uproar over her plight, she was released and sent into exile, eventually becoming for two years the poet-in-residence at Northwestern University (just a few miles from my former church).

"Kindness," Irina says, "is the only thing we can always share with one another, and it is the only thing to hold our world together while even one person goes hungry."¹ Kindness. She speaks out of the experience of having everything taken away from her, everything that is except her dignity and her faith. In her memoir, Grey Is the Color of Hope, she writes about being sorely tormented by her jailers but refusing to give in to hate. "If you start to hate," she says, "you can never stop... You can burn yourself up from (the) inside." Would that our friends from the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, understood that.

Irina Ratushinskaya has something to teach us. It is the same thing James offers in his

¹ Irina Ratushinskaya in her Introduction to Chekhov's The Island of Sakhalin

letter.

“What does it profit, sisters and brothers, if a person claims to have faith but has not works? Can such faith save? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

And what kind of “works” are we talking about? Just “kindness” freely shared. Just the common decency of seeing the other – even the other who torments you – as one who is more like than unlike you and therefore as someone who is deserving of your compassion and understanding.

In the 6th grade cafeteria . . . in the check out line at Hannafords . . . at home when it's time to put the kids to bed or figure out who's turn it is to cook tonight. *“By my works I will show you my faith,”* James says. As we begin a new season in our life together, let us recommit ourselves to this simple but oh so fundamental reality. Let's walk our talk. Let's go where we claim to be looking. Let's show our faith by our works. Amen.