Today we continue what will be several weeks with a book Martin Luther had real reservations about. Luther’s willingness to criticize the book of James reveals we Lutherans have never been uncritical Bible thumpers. Just because the Bible says it isn’t good enough for us. The truth is the Bible says a whole lot of things and they need to be fit together with care; not through an arbitrary appeal to this one verse, chapter, book, or translation. For us, the required care is administered when the Bible emerges as a means of grace; a means by which faith in the Good News of Jesus Christ is awakened and sustained. And this perspective reveals Luther’s beef with the book of James. The book of James has very little to say about Jesus.

Believe it or not, the reference to Jesus made in today’s reading from James is the second and final such reference in the entire book. Two references to Jesus were just never going to be enough for Luther. For him, such limited discussion of Jesus was bound to scuttle the Good News that we are saved not by what we do or don’t do, but by the free and unmerited grace of God at work in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith. But perhaps Luther overplayed his hand just a bit when it comes to James’ limited references to Jesus. As little as it has to say about Jesus directly, something said in today’s reading from James did nonetheless remind me of the Good News we as the Church celebrate and proclaim.

I thought gospel, good news, glad tidings when I ran across the accusation that the community first addressed by Jesus had started to make distinctions in what was to be its life together. This talk of distinctions immediately got me thinking about what’s said midway through chapter three of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans. With language much beloved in Lutheran circles, St. Paul writes, “There is no distinction. There is no distinction. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” It’s the necessary prelude, the necessary setup, to what St. Paul goes on to write next. With all of us sinning and falling short, there’s only one way out of the grave; only one way beyond our present brokenness. It’s the way God makes; choosing to make it freely in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith. Translation. We transcend the grave, we transcend life as we know it on God’s terms not our own.

Now if we now turn to our reading from Proverbs, it turns out that life as we presently know it also emerges on God’s terms. In our first reading, we hear there are no distinctions when life as we know it begins. As the writer traditionally thought to be Solomon says plainly, both rich and poor, both privileged and unprivileged, are made by the same Lord. Translation. Life as we know it begins in the same fashion that life in the Kingdom of God begins and that’s on God’s terms, not our own. And this bookend I do believe brings us to the here and now way of life today’s appointed readings from Scripture hope to encourage. With life in our present and life in God’s future both beginning on God’s terms, I do believe it is the hope of today’s collection of biblical readings that we might live on God’s terms now as well. The question becomes: What are God’s terms now? What are God’s terms for the period of time separating the promise of our baptism from its fulfillment through the receipt of the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting?

The Lutheran answer to this big question has always been faith. We have long taught and proclaimed that a life lived on God’s terms now is a life of faith in Jesus Christ and that such faith is given to us by the Holy Spirit when we gather together as we are now—with one another and around the word of God and the sacraments of God. For some time now, our slogan has been by grace alone through faith alone; a proposition that today’s reading from James seems to destroy.

“Can faith save you,” James asks. His answer: Absolutely not. Faith without works is dead. But as much as it might sound as if these words absolutely destroy the long held Lutheran position on God’s terms for here and now living, they don’t. For us, faith and works are part of the same package. With the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith comes the works and where there are works there’s faith too. Rather than requiring two separate movements or developments, faith and works go together. Faith alone can get the job done because the only kind of faith the Holy Spirit knows how to give is faith with God’s desired works built into it right from the start. But even so, what do these works built right into the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith entail? What kinds of works shall provide the assurance that we have the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith and are therefore living by and on God’s terms now?

If we stick with today’s appointed readings, words like “generosity” and “mercy” come to the fore here. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says things like blessed are the meek and poor in spirit, as well as things like blessed are the peacemakers and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Our reading from Proverbs is much simpler. It says, “Blessed are the generous.” When we’re generous in our dealing with one another and the rest of creation, it’s a telltale sight that we have the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith with God’s desired works built right into it. Using related but somewhat different language, James says similar things about mercy.

Never rounding his edges, always steering clear of the watering down involved in the use of euphemism, St. James gets right after it today. He writes, “Judgement will be without mercy for those who are not merciful. But mercy, mercy triumphs over judgment.” It doesn’t get much clearer than this. When we’re merciful, when we practice mercy in our dealings with one another and the rest of creation, it’s strong evidence that we have the Holy Sprit’s gift of faith with God’s desired works built right into it. And in my estimation, there’s probably not much of a difference between James’ emphasis upon mercy and our reading from Proverbs’ emphasis upon generosity. When we’re merciful, we practice grace. We return God’s grace in his Son and the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith by going above and beyond the call of duty. We do the same when we’re generous. And so, is that it then? Do we live on God’s terms now when we live out the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith through lives of grace; through lives that return God’s mercy and generosity for us in his Son through a mercy and generosity of our own? If we stick with the actual language employed by our appointed readings from Scripture, I would say that is it. But I myself think we can take the actual language of our readings a bit farther and get back to the language with which I began today.

I began today with a reference to Romans chapter three and it’s talk of how there’s no distinction between us. In practical and functional terms, I’d say this is what we do when we practice mercy and/or generosity. What we do when we go above and beyond the call of duty for one another is recognize there’s no distinction between us—that we’re all important. When we lighten each other’s burdens, when we come to each other’s assistance or rescue, we recognize that we need each other; that we’re all here for a reason; that we’re engaged in an endeavor that’s critical and that requires all of us. And this is to live as if there’s no distinction between us. Yes, it’s to live as if the manifestation of the Holy Spirit has been given to each of us. And my, oh my, when and where the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith gets us to live this way is it ever a wonderful and beautiful thing. For if you’re at all like me, I think you’d agree that what our world needs right now isn’t more of the finger pointing that comes with the making of distinctions. What our world needs more of is the hand joining that comes to pass when we stop making distinctions and throw in with one another. In, by, and through the Holy Spirit, may our fingers therefore go down and our hands join. Amen!