

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, because you are holy, we seek to be holy. We seek to find those places where we shirk from growth, where we hide from responsibility, where we live in denial, where we protect ourselves from disappointment when we live in a world where things like that are inevitable to happen. Help us to be bold in your name. Let us not live in fear, fear of failure, fear of setback, fear of anything, but allow us to acknowledge our fear as focus our attentions and efforts on serving you and our neighbor, for all that we do that benefits your children also glorifies you and your name. Hear us, we pray, Gracious One.

Holy God, we pray for authentic faith. We pray for faith that will empower us to seek you always. We pray for faith that will give us the energy to love our neighbors however we best can with the gifts you have given us. Help us, God, not to lean on an intellectual faith but a faith that comes out every day to do what we can to love our neighbor and to lift your name. We know you dispense gifts through your Holy Spirit that give us the means to serve you in different ways, but sometimes, we either are unsure or unwilling to put them to their proper use. Help us to be courageous and grow in faith that will lead us to be faithful servants, not merely faithful believers. We pray all these things in the name of our object of faith, and the one who gives us the direction and energy to live out that faith everyday, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

I believe that we will get out of church on time. I believe the Chicago Bears have a legitimate shot at winning the Super Bowl this next year. I don't think I believe in UFOs. I believe that soccer and hockey are the most underappreciated sports in the United States. I believe the Green Bay Packers are quite full of themselves and Jeff is highly misguided by

following such a team. I believe that there should be the same number of hot dog buns and hamburger buns in the same package. I believe Citizen Kane is the best movie ever made, and Star Wars is pretty close. I believe being a pastor is a harder job than many know. I also really, really believe I want a drink of water right now.

Ya know what? Who cares what I believe? Everyone's got an opinion. Beliefs can be important, but they have their place. The problem is when we start equating simple belief and opinion with faith. They aren't the same thing at all; in fact, that does a great disservice to faith. Beliefs are easy to come by, but faith is deeper and much, much more real and influential. The stakes are much higher than just being incorrect if a belief is proven wrong. Two weeks ago, Jeff delivered a powerful sermon on the importance of faith. Now we come back to the same topic as we re-evaluate faithful discipleship. I want to take what he said and go a step further. Faith is integral to the life of the Christian; it is the means by which we come to know our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. But faith is not an intellectual exercise. It is also not a feeling, nor is it a simple belief. Connecting with that idea, last week, we discussed the gifts we have from God that we share with one another. You are good at something your neighbor is not; your neighbor is good at things that you are not. This is not a bad thing; what it reaffirms time and again is that we need each other to be faithful ministers of the church. But, as we know, there's a difference between having gifts and putting those gifts into use. It's a matter of faith. In order for our beliefs to be faith, they must be put to action. If not, then it is not faith; it is a mere cognitive process that, as James says, means really nothing beyond an opinion. Let's delve in to James' always-important slant on what authentic faith is, how I've seen it put into use, and how we all can work on deepening our faith through this understanding of what authentic faith is.

James is hard to encounter; the book has a difficult message. It's blunt and heavy about what is appropriate for the Christian and what is not. However, James has one of my favorite passages in scripture with his powerful statement on the reality of faith. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" In other words, what if you say you have faith but you don't do anything about it? This powerful passage must be linked with the passage immediately preceding it, which is around showing favoritism. He asks, essentially, how can we be considered faithful if we tell any of God's children that they are not worthwhile through our actions? Consequently, James divorces any idea of faith being a mere cognitive process or a mode of feeling; to him, faith has work boots, work clothes, and work gloves. It must serve God's children. Faith, if it is real, must move somewhere, must do something, must grow through a life that lives faith in mind and in body. If it just lives in the mind, then it's not really faith. James says that even the demons believe...and shudder, and we know that's not really faith.

In the past, I've heard about faith and good works being like two blades on a pair of scissors; you can't have one without the other. In a way, that is a good model, but I've come to think of it a different way. Faith and works are like a sharp knife. Faith without works is like a knife that has no sharpness to it. What really is it good for then? It has no usefulness; it's not a knife. Ultimately, it's not faith or works, it's not faith with works, it's not even faith and works. It's faith IS works. You can believe all you want that a bulb will grow into a flower in its own time, but if you don't plant it, then it's not faith. You have the mere cognitive process of "I think." Faith only becomes faith when we have the belief and the action and put them together. Here's the ultimate test: the proof in the pudding is that you WANT, not feel forced, to put faith into action; that is how we know it is truly faith.

James in the past has gotten a bad rap. Luther hated the book of James. He called it a “Gospel of Straw” because he interpreted James as preaching salvation by works against Paul’s salvation by faith alone. We do a disservice when we assume that James is trying to overrule Paul’s statements of salvation by faith alone. James is far from teaching works righteousness, that we can be saved by what we do. Indeed not; what James is arguing is the same thing that Paul was arguing in the scripture passage we heard a few weeks ago, as Paul spoke about how Abraham was justified by his faith, and not his works. At first glance, we might think that James is arguing against it, but that’s not the case, according to the New Interpreter’s Commentary. Instead, James would say we need to look at the evidence. Abraham’s faith was authentic because he didn’t just believe God but followed through with what God asked of him. He believed God and then he followed God. Paul and James are not arguing against each other but articulating the same thing through two different viewpoints. As we know, each book in the scriptures had a specific audience, so they were probably saying things in just the right way for their audience to fully take in the message. What I hear is Paul laying a foundation and James pushing that foundation to maturity, which means, indeed, we do have to do some harder things to grow into fullness.

Well, great message, Pastor! But what do we do about it? Yes, we need to bring it all down to the main question: what does it mean to me? How do I live with this message? We said last week, start with what you like doing, what you can do, recognizing your limitations, and doing what feeds you. The other day, Larry told me he was wondering how to respond to my last sermon about the gifts that we all have. Larry told me, “Well, I just can’t do much anymore.” And indeed, it’s important, as Larry told me, to know our limitations. These days he is mindful of his limitations. He undergoes chemotherapy, which

really takes a toll on his physical abilities. Nevertheless, what I admired was his desire to figure out what he can do. James speaks of putting that faith into action, and, in Larry's case and many others, that action depends on our time and energies. He said he can still pray, support the church monetarily, and support the church's people.

I think the last part is of the greatest importance. No matter what energy, gifts, and abilities we have, we can still lift up our neighbor here in these walls and those whom have never come into the church. One of the most insulting parts of James example of favoritism is that it shows no desire at all to get to know the other and to love the other. You can't help the other person when you can't even hold a dialogue, and that, to everyone else, says much about Jesus Christ. It's true that the only Christ some people will ever see is Christ's followers; in other words, you and me. Don't let the loud ones win, those followers who have a hateful message that has nothing to do with Christ's Gospel of Love. We can demonstrate this everyday in our own unique ways.

In the same way, many of you know Ilene, but some of you may not know her well. She is a member of Faith that is not able to attend anymore due to her health. In fact, she's not really able to get out of her house as much as she wants. She struggles with this reality, but it doesn't hinder her from seeking to serve where she can. She is very much a part of the life of this congregation and lives out a life of discipleship to the best of her ability. Ilene is the top of the Prayer Line for Faith and passes along prayer requests to all those on the prayer line. This is one ministry she knows she can do. While I know she is open to serving in whatever capability she can, Ilene leads this small but meaningful ministry according to her gifts and ability. If Ilene can serve in the way that she can according to her ability and energy, we all have a way to expand our faith through doing.

These are two examples of people who are working to put faith in action in the ways they best can. I know they have shared their struggles with the limitations they find their circumstances placing on them. And that's hard, but because there are all these things we cannot do does not mean that we cannot do all things. There is a place in each of us where our faith can feed our church, feed our neighbors, feed ourselves in faithfulness. I truly believe that each of you are here for a reason, to make the whole better through your faithful exercise of the gifts and graces God gave you as we seek to be disciples. Excuses for excuses' sake have no place for James in the Scriptures or with God, but openness, learning, questioning, seeking to understand where I am and where I can serve are always welcome. Scripture always welcomes an open heart, a heart that seeks to understand instead of claiming to have all the answers, but that's the idea for next week.

The bottom line is that faith is real when it works; we all have gifts to serve one another in many different ways. Like we said last week, you are good at something your neighbor is not and vice versa. God has laid upon us gifts that we can use for the betterment of all of us when we work in love. But we have to use them; we must always be in discernment and growth around how we put them into action, keeping in mind who we are, what gifts we have, and the limitations that life and our abilities have on us. Some of us cannot do what we once did, but that's not the point. The point is how we can serve here and now with the gifts, energy, and abilities we have, for we all have a place at all points in our lives. Being a disciple is a life-long journey, and we cannot ever say in this lifetime we are done. Be who you are, with your own gifts, and put it all into use for the benefit of your neighbors, those in these walls and beyond, whom we must love. Only then is our faith fully faith. Thanks be to God for these gifts and the means to use them! Amen and Amen.