

Faith that Works

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at Knox Presbyterian Church, September 15, 1985, the 16th Sunday after Pentecost. Scripture: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9; Psalm 125; James 2:1-5, 8-10, 14-18; Mark 8:27-38.

My text for this morning comes to us from our epistle Lesson: "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by actions is dead." What James says is clear and simple. He says there are two characteristics of a faith that works. A faith that works, first of all, doesn't discriminate against a person on the basis of their place in society and, secondly, a faith that works clothes the naked, feeds the hungry and offers hospitality to the homeless. These aren't the only characteristics of a living faith but they're two important ones. They aren't Christian options, like an air-conditioner on a new car. Christian faith without these two qualities isn't a living faith. We don't need 20 minutes of exposition to explain what James means. ~~What he says is clear. What we need to do is discover how~~ to obey what he says. So that's the theme of this sermon. How can we as a congregation become more of a church that puts its faith to work?

In my previous church in Reedsville something happened which I'm beginning to sense is a possibility here. When I came to Reedsville it was a sleepy country church that had proclaimed the Gospel for over 200 years to its own kind of people. It was a rich, upper middle class church. In the congregation of 200 were the presidents of two banks, 2 bank vice-presidents, the president and vice-president of the Standard steel plant as well as several other high ranking executives. There were several doctors, a college professor and many teachers. There were owners of successful businesses. There were the landed gentry, retired and politically powerful people who lived comfortably in 200 year old houses on country estates that had been in their families for generations. Three-quarters of the church were descendants of the original

Scotch-Irish immigrants, McNitts, Reeds, Taylors, Rodgers. Their ancestors, buried in the church cemetery, had worshiped in Reedsville since before the Revolution. One visitor told me after a service, "You have the power structure of Mifflin county worshipping at your church".

These people were quite orthodox in their theology. They believed in the authority of Scripture, the deity and resurrection of Christ. They were good people, the kind of people every town loves to have. They had class and style. They didn't consciously look down on people who didn't share their wealth or heritage but we all naturally tend to associate with people like ourselves and feel uncomfortable with people who belong to another social class. It takes a lot of effort and motivation for most of us to reach out and welcome people who aren't like ourselves. So people who weren't McNitts, Rodgers, Taylors or Reeds were intimidated by the wealth and power of the old-timers. Many didn't feel welcomed at the Presbyterian church. They sensed a favoritism and discrimination that James condemned in our Epistle lesson.

Sometimes that favoritism was quite open. I remember one Sunday morning before the service meeting a new young family, casually dressed, hurriedly leaving the sanctuary. The wife was crying. The husband looked angry. I stopped and asked what the trouble was. Gary said they'd come in and sat in a certain pew but a well dressed man and his wife came in later and informed them they were sitting in the family pew. It was one of our elders. He was a good man. He was concerned about correct doctrine and morals. But he was instinctively showing favoritism and being a respecter of persons. I couldn't imagine Tom asking old Mr. Reed to move if he'd sat in his pew. Tom wasn't being malicious. He was simply being incredibly thoughtless.

I led Gary, Marsha and their children back into the church and assured

them it wouldn't happen again. That morning I began the service by relating the incident without naming names and made clear that the church belonged to Jesus Christ and that all the pews were reserved for visitors. I went on to say how the church, unlike all other institutions exists, primarily, for non-members. Well, I angered some of the strongest supporters of the church with those comments. In a church that's 200 years old change takes place slowly and it's resisted angrily. Someone has said that *all* change is experienced by *all* people as loss and is followed by anger. That insight helped me to understand the hostility that I felt from some of the old-timers after that service. It doesn't matter if the changes are for the good. People inherently don't like change and are angry when it comes.

But over the years slow changes took place. Fortunately for me there was no Sunday evening service when I came to Reedsville. This left Sunday evenings free to do whatever I wanted. The thought of having another worship service didn't make much sense to me. That's not what we needed. We needed something different. I began to invite neighbors *and* members to the church basement on Sunday evenings to study the Bible and to talk. We were a mixed group. Some were quite wealthy and came well dressed, others were poor and had a somewhat shabby appearance in comparison. We were single, married and divorced. We were young and old. We were conservative and liberal. We were religious and irreligious.

In the more intimate atmosphere of a small room and never in groups of more than 10, people felt more free to say what they really believed and felt. They were more willing to pray publicly and ask others to pray for them. We got to know one another in a way that can't be done in a traditional worship service. We began to see beneath our facades. We began to learn how to minister to one another more effectively. We began

to realize it's not important what kind of clothes you can afford or how much education you've had. It's not important if you can trace your ancestors back to before the revolutionary war. We began to discover what really is important in life. Over the years some men and women came to know Christ as Lord and Savior. Encouraged by one another they began to come to the Sunday morning worship service. People from lower class backgrounds, without any famous ancestors, without furs and expensive cars and furs, began to feel like they belonged. Eventually these men and women became elders and teachers in the church.

Rebecca Pippert shares a similar story in her book entitled, *Out of the Saltshaker*. She wrote, "When I first came to Portland, Oregon, I met a student on one of the campuses where I worked. He was brilliant and looked like he was always pondering the esoteric. His hair was always messy, and in the entire time I knew him, I never once saw him wear a pair of shoes. Rain, sleet or snow, Bill was always barefoot. While he was attending college he had become a Christian. At this time a well-dressed, middle-class church across the street from the campus wanted to develop more of a ministry to the students. They weren't sure how to go about it, but they tried to make them feel welcome. One day Bill decided to worship there. He walked into this church, wearing his blue jeans, tee shirt and of course no shoes. People looked a bit uncomfortable, but no one said anything. So Bill began walking down the aisle looking for a seat. The church was quite crowded that Sunday, so as he got down to the front pew and realized that there were no seats, he just squatted on the carpet-- perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, but perhaps unnerving for a church congregation. The tension in the air became so thick one could slice it.

"Suddenly an elderly man began walking down the aisle toward the

boy. Was he going to scold Bill? My friends who saw him approaching said they thought, "You can't blame him for what he's going to do. He'd never guess Bill is a Christian (dressed the way he is). And his world is too distant from Bill's to understand. You can't blame him for what he's going to do.

"As the man kept walking slowly down the aisle, the church became utterly silent, all eyes were focused on him, you couldn't hear anyone breathe. When the man reached Bill, with some difficulty he lowered himself and sat down next to him on the carpet. He and Bill worshipped together on the floor that Sunday. I was told there was not a dry eye in the congregation."

So many people come to church on Sunday mornings wearing, not shabby clothes like Bill, but smiling masks that say, 'I'm fine; no problems'. So-often-this-is-just-a-facade-that-usually-covers-deep-and-often-ugly-hurts. In every church there are men and women struggling with failing marriages, threatened by financial crisis, struggling personally with such issues as childlessness, abortion and homosexuality. Crushed by doubts, depression and disappointment. And after the service we say to one another, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed" but we never discover the desperation, the loneliness, the hunger for love and human warmth the man or woman sitting next to us in the pew feels. Any church that wants to take Christian nurture seriously must pry under the mask.

I have a dream of a church filled with God's passionate people, concerned about the souls and bodies of others. And I have, not only a dream, but a plan. I have a plan whereby Sunday evenings will be a time when men and women, married and unmarried, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, religious or un-religious can come together in small intimate groups to learn how to love and be loved and to discover the

reality of the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

John Stott has pointed out that every church needs a variety of services to be truly biblical. He points to the practice of the early church in Jerusalem where they worshipped together in large groups in the temple but they also met in small groups. There was the majesty of the formal temple worship focusing on the glory of God but there was also the intimate and informal fellowship of the small groups where mutual needs were discovered and where Christian growth was most effectively nurtured. Both were needed. Both were practiced.

I have a dream and a plan for that New Testament practice to be revived here at Knox and that the power of the Spirit that found release in the lives of God's passionate people in the days of the apostles will find release once again among us. Will you come out this evening to learn more about this dream—and plan? Will you take that one small act of commitment that may set you on the path to discovering a faith that works?

Let us pray: Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*