

Sunday - September 6, 2009  
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner  
Sermon - **They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love**

*"May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace for you are our Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen."*

James asks a pertinent question: What is the advantage of having faith unless you put it into practice? Can faith by itself save you?

Those of you who have studied the apostle Paul are likely thinking, "well, yes." You would be accurate in remembering that Paul wrote that faith would be our salvation. Paul said in Galatians 2:16 "yet we know that a person is not justified (made right) by observing the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."

Do James and Paul contradict each other? No, not if we understand the audience and purpose for which they were writing. Paul was writing to and dealing with a church that was opposed to admitting Gentile-Christian converts unless they first accepted the demands of Judaism, especially those requirements about circumcision and food restrictions. Paul argued over and over with his churches that just because you were originally Jewish and were obedient to Jewish law, you Jewish-Christians do not have any advantage over Gentile-Christians, or those who were not Jewish first before believing in Christ. Paul wanted his churches to know that faith in Christ is enough to put a person right with God. Paul is addressing the Jew who seeks to obtain salvation by keeping the law of God. Paul says, "Not the works of the law (the law of Moses) but faith in Christ brings salvation."

James, in the passage we just read, is dealing with another issue --- he's tackling Christian morality about putting faith into practice. He is taking a stand about whether making a Christian commitment is worth anything, unless it changes the way in which you live. James begins with very practical words about how the churches should treat those who come to them; they are to act in love to the poor just as they might treat well the rich. James is NOT saying that faith is unimportant; he's looking at the results of that faith. Works are the tangible effects of faith. It is a bit like looking at a pair of scissors and asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary. They must each function together for the scissors to cut. James is talking to the person who says that he has faith but fails to put it into practice. If James were here this morning, he might listen to us say our Affirmation of Faith, then ask us a question about what we're actually DOING about the faith we SAY we have.

If we say we "have faith," can it be seen in us? As I've often repeated that quote, "if you were arrested for being a Christian, what evidence would be used to prove the charge? What further evidence do you want to provide? James says "faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead. What is meant by "works"? Our works show how we love. When Jesus was asked to sum it all up-all the law and the prophets, all his teachings and parables-when he was asked, "What's the greatest commandment, that is to say, what matters most? Give us one sound bite we can take home with us", Jesus gave this response: You shall

love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. (Matthew 22:34-40)

For whatever reason, we spend an awful lot of our time, picking and probing at a lot of issues and questions that Jesus did not address. He focused on what was important and necessary for our salvation – our faith and how it shows itself in love. Although you and I may have a variety of opinions about all sorts of topics that are in the public religious debate today, if we REALLY read and think about Jesus' life, teaching and ministry, we still come out with "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself."

I'm often asked to comment on a variety of what I call "secondary questions" or tangential issues to the Christian faith. And I have opinions and some of my opinions are in sync with your opinions and some are not. Thankfully, we live in a country where a variety of opinions can be held, and we belong to a Christian denomination in which a variety of **opinions are** held. You and I, as Methodists --- as Christians --follow a Jesus who does not draw a circle and leave me out, but opens his arms and invites you and me and so many others in --- with our varying struggles and opinions. Jesus, when asked to take a stand differentiating between the laws of Judaism responded, "love God and love neighbor."

"But Jesus, don't we need to know where people stand on issues? What if they don't believe the KJV is the truest translation of the Bible? What about the big issues that our Sunday evening study class addressed, like euthanasia, prayer in schools, homosexuality, the death penalty, creation/evolution or separation of church and state..... what about all those? Don't we need to know where people stand if we are to know if they are real Christians?

Jesus said, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength; and you shall love your neighbor as much as you do your own life. It is as simple and as complicated as that. Now let me be quick to say that I do think it is important for individual and for the church to **wrestle** with the issues of our day. That's why we offer Sunday School classes and book study groups so there is a safe place and time where people of faith can probe and learn.

It is not that all these other things don't matter; it's just that they are not at the center. In Jesus' time, and frankly, up to right now, Jews are discussing and debating every little word in the Old Testament. They argue, probe and disagree --- they voice their opinions about the way they read and interpret what we call the Old testament. So, too, do many Christians – read, discuss, disagree, probe, our New Testament as well. I think it is helpful in our growth and in our faith journey to consider and reconsider these questions brought to the forefront by our faith. But they are not the core of Jesus' teaching. Frankly, Jesus called you and me to a life of works that is the hardest aspect of our entire lives --- simple to enunciate, but hard to live..... we are to love.

Jesus looks at my heart and says, "Paula, I don't need to know what your stance on predestination is..... but, do you love me? Do you love my people? HOW are you living out that love? That's the litmus test of Christian discipleship: and it's so huge that I struggle with it, daily, hourly. Do I love God with my heart,

soul, mind and strength; and do I love you and all my neighbors as much as I love myself? In trying to answer these tough questions, I am just so grateful that I worship a God who has not given up on me yet. A God whose very definition is grace (unmerited favor and love), who is known for mercy..... who allows me, in all my stumbling and learning and falling down and getting up again, who allows me to keep walking this path of faith. It is a journey that you and I share ---- and we come together sometimes in agreement, and sometimes in disagreement. I think perhaps those disagreements are the real test of the commandment to “love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.”

This is one perspective on the faith—works discussion. I hope it has prodded you to examine the relationship of your faith to your works – to the way you show love. This true story illustrates just how important it is – how life-changing, world-changing. In Sophiatown, S. Africa there is a church where, 50 years ago, a young priest ministered to the people of the town. This young priest tried to live by Jesus’ words – he had a strong faith life. In the 1950s under apartheid, when the government sent military trucks in the night to take the people away and sent bulldozers to smash their houses down, this young priest tried to stop all that meanness and wrong. The priest was admonished by his bishop and sent home to England, for the tide of public opinion – even in the church – did not support the priest aligning with the blacks under apartheid. But the priest left behind him in that village a young black teenager who had been his altar boy and whom he had faithfully visited in the hospital when the boy had tuberculosis. The priest’s name was Trevor Huddleston—actually, I’d never before heard of him. But the witness of Priest Trevor Huddleston’s faith and works changed the teen boy. The altar boy was Desmond Tutu who became archbishop Tutu, the moral voice and conscience of S.Africa, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Ghandi Peace Prize, the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism and the American Presidential Medal of Honor -- a man whose faith led him to act so that freedom for blacks might be possible. And a man whose faith in the power of forgiveness and reconciliation led him to chair the reconciliation committee which helped save his country from disintegration into bloodshed. The world is better because of the faith and works of Trevor Huddleston and Desmond Tutu.

Love God, love your neighbor as yourself – that’s what Jesus commanded..... he said it was absolutely what we must do. A familiar hymn’s lyrics says: We are one in the spirit, we are one in the lord. They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, they will know we are Christians by our love. The Bible reminds us, “For faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

I will be reading a passage from the letter of James. James was Jesus’ older brother. In the beginning he did not believe in Jesus as son of God, but he came later to faith in him and James became leader of the church in Jerusalem. James is writing this letter to a wide grouping of Christians and with his different emphasis on faith and works shows us that even in the early years of the church, different interpretations were already current. Listen now for the word of God for you today as I read from James 2:1-8, 14-17.

I want to take a few minutes to share with you a matter of great seriousness in this congregation. On July 14 allegations of improper behavior of our Director of Youth Ministries were brought to my attention. Jen Brennan was immediately placed on administrative leave, and a report was filed with the sheriff's department and child protective services, as we are mandated by law to do. The youth, their parents and the personnel committee of the church, the Staff, Parish Relations Committee were informed since they were the ones most closely impacted. In the intervening weeks, investigation has taken place by the relevant legal authorities. All, here at St. Matthias, have cooperated fully and faithfully with this investigation. The results of that investigation have been turned over to the commonwealth attorney. I am informing you of this matter because it is highly likely that it will become public knowledge this week, and I wanted you to have a "heads up" prior to possible media attention.

I solicit your continuing practice of not gossiping. I applaud the supportive, loving way you have lived out BEING the church over these last 2 months and ask that you continue showing your love, not judging. Please pray for all involved in this – and particularly for our youth and youth leaders who are working with and loving our youth through some hard times. Please pray for truth to be heard and that we might experience God's goodness as a final outcome. It is important to point out that the Pharisees and scribes were not bad people. They did not rob, steal or disturb the peace. They were committed people who were devoted to their religion.

- "Externals are worse than useless, unless the heart is in the right place." C. F. D. Moule

-Many struggled to hold on to their identity after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Enforcing rules and regulations for maintaining purity was one way to maintain a sense of themselves as the people of Israel.

-Jesus perhaps might have said, its not so much that you are what you eat, but whats eating you. Rev. Mary Ogus

-how can we keep from "majoring in minors?". How can we keep the main thing the main thing?

-Jesus saw a preoccupation with the external when he looked at the scribes -- the expert Bible teachers, the religion professors with their Ph.D.s in theology and hermeneutics -- and the Pharisees -- the devout guardians of the faith, the religion experts, the senior pastors and serious churchgoers. These people knew the holiness code cover to cover and could quote you chapter and verse. Theyd become "purity professionals," ritual specialists. Heidi Husted

-It is in the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law that Gods will is to be found.

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A story --

Telemachus was a monk who lived in Asia Minor about the year 400 AD. During his life the gladiatorial games were very popular. The gladiators were usually slaves or political prisoners who were condemned to fight each other unto death for the amusement of the spectators. People were fascinated by the sight of blood and gore upon the arena floor.

Telemachus was very much disturbed that the Emperor Honorius, who was a Christian, sponsored the games and that so many people who called themselves Christian went to see them. What, he wondered, could be further from the Spirit of Christ than the horrible cruelty of the gladiatorial games? The bishops and priests spoke against them, but most people were deaf to their message.

Telemachus realized that talking about this evil was not enough. It was time to do something. But what could he actually accomplish - one lone monk against the whole Roman Empire? He had no power. And they had been part of Roman life for centuries. Nothing that he could possibly do would ever make a difference. For a long time Telemachus agonized about the problem. Finally he could not live with himself any longer. For the sake of his own soul he decided he had to obey the voice of Christ within him - regardless of the consequences. He set out for Rome.

When Telemachus entered the city, the people he met had gone mad with excitement. "To the Coliseum!", they cried out. "The games are about to start.!"

Telemachus followed the crowd. Soon he was seated among all the other people. Far away in a special place he saw the emperor.

The gladiators came out into the centre of the arena. Everybody was tense. Everybody was silent as the two men faced each other. The men drew their swords. The fight was about to be on! One of them would probably die within a few minutes. Who would it be?

At that moment Telemachus rose from his seat and ran down onto the arena floor. He held high the cross of Christ that he carried and threw himself into a position between the two gladiators.

"In the name of our Master," he cried, "Stop fighting!"

The two men hesitated. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

They did not know what to do. They put up their swords for a moment. The spectators were furious. Telemachus had robbed them of their entertainment. They yelled wildly and stampeded toward the centre of the arena. They became a mob. With sticks and stones they beat Telemachus to death.

Far down in the arena lay the battered body of the monk. Suddenly the mob and the spectators who had remained in their seats grew quiet. A feeling of revulsion at what had been done swept over them. Emperor Honorius rose and left the Coliseum. The people followed him. Abruptly the games were over.

Emperor Honorius sensed the mood of the crowd that day. His ears were opened by the death of Telemachus. His tongue was loosened as well. He issued an edict forbidding all future gladiatorial games. And so it was, that in about the year 404 AD, because one individual, filled with the love of Christ, dared to say, "No!", all gladiatorial games ceased.

#### PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Let us pray Dear Lord Jesus, help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go. Flood our souls with your spirit and life. Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly that our lives may only be a radiance of yours. Shine through us, and be so in us that every soul we come in contact with may feel your presence in our soul. Let them look up and see no longer us, but only Jesus. Stay with us - and then we shall begin to shine as you shine, so to shine as to be light to others. The light, O Jesus, will be from you. None if it will be ours. It will be you shining on others through us. Let us thus praise you in the way you love best - by shining on those around us... Lord hear our prayer...

Lord our God, in your mercy and justice meet. With unparalleled love you have saved us from death and drawn us into the circle of your life. Open our eyes to the wonders this life sets before us, that we may serve You, free from fear, and love one another as you love us - without regard to riches or poverty, class or place in life.... Lord hear our prayer... Lord, we pray for those who are known to us - and for those who are not - we pray for the dying and for those who mourn the dead, for the sick and for those who faithfully care for them, for the oppressed and for those who despair, for those who have hunger and thirst in body and in soul. Lord hear our prayer.....