

Sermon Sept 5 2021

Epistle: James 2:1–10, 14–18

My brothers, [a] show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. 2 For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, 3 and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” 4 have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. 9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

Faith Without Works Is Dead

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good^[a] is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

18 But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

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The other day I was scrolling through Facebook, killing time while waiting in the doctor’s office. And there it was: “Artist Reimagines Disney Characters with New Back Stories and Super Hero Imagery” ... which basically means hypersexualizing Disney princesses.

“I’m done!” I thought. “I can’t take it anymore. I’m sick and tired of everybody changing everything!”

I’m sick and tired of the way I see people actively subvert the culture just for the sake of subverting the culture. Stop it! I thought, just stop it!

Put into context, it's just a Disney post and it's silly... but it feels like the proverbial "last straw."

It's just all the nonsense. I want it to stop.

Please, let there be some respect for traditional values. It feels like everything from my childhood is being trashed. Everything I grew up with ... our values and culture ... is being disrespected and laughed at and maligned.

So, into this frustration with change and all the disruption it causes, we as a congregation are proposing to set up a **vision planning committee**, with the idea that we are going to set a vision for the future ministry of this congregation, that includes outreach and growth.

There is no future for us as a congregation if we do not reach out and fulfill God's mission to "go and make disciples." Eventually, we will not be a congregation without growth.

Growing things change. It can't be helped. They mature and grow old; they propagate, too: give birth to a new generation before they pass on. If they don't, that branch will die and their legacy with it.

Congregations have life cycles. The average is 80 years. We (who celebrated our 75th recently) are nearing the end of ours unless we send up a shoot, a branch, and begin the cycle again.

That takes energy and effort to do. There is still energy and talent here to do it. The question is... will we?

Someone said to me the other day that we have tried this before, in fact, twice. We have laid out a "five-year plan" not just once, but twice. And nothing changed. We didn't do any of it. But that's not quite true. We have done lots of things. We have been very creative. There are many talented people here and we have used our gifts well for the most part. But this hasn't always resulted in numerical growth.

COVID set us back, too, but I'm not actually willing to blame COVID for our lower attendance, not completely. I don't think COVID was the cause of our current situation so much as it served to reveal a more profound weakness... a weakness revealed in all of us -- including me, as your pastor. And that might be the depth of our faith and what it is that we are really rooted in. Like the parable of the seeds explained, some of us are like rocky soil or desert soil or stone. I like to think that my own faith is well rooted and so it is -- but -- as our friend Cara likes to say: Fully Rely On God. I have to constantly be reminded to do so.

Do I trust the Lord? Absolutely.

Do I trust the Lord enough to give up control? Well -- we're going to find out.

I do not know what lies ahead, but I know that if you want to make God laugh, just tell Him your plans. Well, get ready for a chuckle, O Lord, because here are my thoughts...

O Lord, our God, we want to see this congregation grow and thrive. We want to see growth that includes our faith, our spirits, as well as in our numbers. We want to see young families and young people touched by your Word and Sacraments. We want to see your mission fulfilled in our community. And while this is our desire, we are unsure what role we are to play in your service. Lord Jesus, direct your servants, your people. This is in your hands.

And yet we also know that our hands are not to remain idle. We know that you intend for us to be the means by which your work is done. Over the next six months, O Lord, as we pray and share ideas, direct us in ways that please you and serve your mission. Help us not to be made weary by the world around us. And show us how to love those who have become disenchanting by the culture of crisis and the culture of a disposable world, and welcome them into a hopeful and courageous life lived in you.

Amen.