

First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“A Faith that Works”

Psalm 125
James 2: 1 – 17

August 9, 2015

I believe that I am the pastor of First Presbyterian Church. In fact, my faith that I'm your pastor is utterly unshakable. I have no doubts about it, I'm completely convinced about it, nobody's ever going to change my mind about it, there simply is no *question* about it. I have call papers in my office, which attest to the fact that I'm your pastor. The message board out in front of the church identifies me as “Dr. Richard Boyer, Pastor.” I have a wallet full of business cards which call me “Dr. Richard **R.** Boyer, Pastor.”

When we still had the parking spot that was “reserved for the pastor,” I and I alone was allowed to park in it. Most of you address me as “Pastor Rick.” Whenever someone calls the office and asks to “speak with the pastor,” Shelley Bennett sends the call to me. When you're in the hospital, and you request a visit “from the pastor,” it's my smiling face you expect to see peering into your room. So, let there be no mistake: I am First Presbyterian's pastor. I am *your* pastor. You say so... I say so... everybody says so.

But... suppose I never actually *did* any of the things that “pastors” are supposed to do? I mean, forget the wallet full of business cards... what if I never read the Bible? Or didn't even own a Bible? Or considered the Bible to be a bunch of flimflam? Never mind what it says on the message board, or the luxury parking space for the pastor... what if I ignored you when you were in the hospital, or laughed at you when your family was facing some crisis?

Sure, I've got call papers stuffed in my filing cabinet... but what if that Princeton degree hanging in my office was ordered through the mail? What if I told you to buzz off and quit bugging me when you call me for pastoral care? What if I told our Confirmands to stop worrying so much about Jesus, and to spend more time on the important things of life: like looking good, being important, and making a lot of money?

Yes, you call me “Pastor Rick...” but what if I refused to ever teach Sunday school? Or sit in on a Session meeting? Or show up for Sunday worship? Would I still be your pastor? Would you still give me a parking space, if my pastorate was merely a title? Would you keep my name on the board outside, if I was your minister in name only? Would you still call me “reverend,” if I was rarely, if ever, reverent?

You see, I can believe that I'm your pastor with all my heart, and mind, and strength... and I can hold that belief with all the conviction I can muster. But if my pastorate is just about what I *believe*, and not about what I actually *do*, then that's not much of a pastorate. If there are no pastoral *actions* to back up my pastoral *convictions*... then my pastoral identity isn't going to make much of a difference. My

pastoral *belief*... must lead to pastoral *work*... if my pastoral *position*... is to be genuinely, well, *pastoral*.

Or, consider this example: I believe that I will someday be a guitar player. I am completely convinced that, before I get too old and arthritic to do it, I *will* purchase a guitar; take some lessons; and learn how to rock out like Eric Clapton. *I believe this. I have faith in it. I trust that it's going to happen.*

But... is it going to happen, if I don't ever go to the music store and pick up a guitar? Am I going to learn chords by thinking about them, or hoping that they just come to me someday, or wishing that I could put the music book under my pillow so the skill and knowledge could just seep up into my brain? Are the folks who put together these Wednesday concerts at Agawam Park going to say, "*Well, hey there Rick! You're on the schedule next week because, even though you can't play a lick, because, by golly, you believe that you'll be a guitarist someday!*"

Obviously, the answer to all those questions is a big, fat, "*No!*" If there's no practicing... there's no guitar playing. If there's nothing but wishful thinking... there's no learning chords, and keys, and songs. If all I do is *have faith* that I'm going to play the instrument... then I'll never get beyond where I am right now: listening to *other* people play. Once again, as with my belief that I'm your pastor, my belief about playing the guitar must lead to some kind of actual *work* which supports and gives evidence of that belief... or else that mere belief will get me nowhere.

Now, I realize that these aren't perfect analogies... but I share them with you because I think they shed some light on the point which James is making in our epistle lesson this morning. Only, James isn't talking about pastors or musicians, of course... he's talking about Christian disciples, who are trying to live the life of faith. And what he's saying about the life of faith is that, if it's genuine and honest and true, it won't sit dormant and fallow and inert... it will give rise to works which will attest to it, and validate it, and give evidence of it.

In the same way that my belief that I'm your pastor is corroborated by my pastoral ministry and behavior... our belief in the Lord is corroborated by our efforts to serve God, and to imitate Christ, and to conform our lifestyles to the wisdom of His Word. In the same way that my faith that I'll one day play the guitar is given life and vitality through practicing and self-discipline... our faith in Jesus Christ comes alive as we seek Him, and love Him, and do our best to obey Him.

All of which simply means that, to have faith in Christ is more than simply giving our intellectual assent to a set of theological convictions, or a collection of philosophical principles, or an assortment of cherished opinions which have been handed down through the ages. No, to have faith in Christ is to allow what we *believe* to affect how we *live*... it's to allow our discipleship to engage our heart, and our mind, *and* our will in such a way that our whole life testifies to the truth and power of the gospel.

This, I believe, is what James is getting at in the portion of his letter that we read together today. He wants his readers... he wants you and me... to understand that following Jesus Christ as His disciple never has been, and never can be, an exercise of the intellect only. Instead, he insists that discipleship involves the whole of who we are as

human creatures... which takes us far beyond the realm of mere opinion, or belief, or conviction.

It is, as he says, to take seriously Jesus' commandment that we "love our neighbor as ourself." It's to see other people as God Himself sees them, and to serve them as we ourselves have been served by our Heavenly Father. Listen again to what James has to say:

"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

Now, at first glance, we might think that James is saying that it's our **good works** that save us... that eternal life is something that we earn through our own effort... that it's what we **do**, rather than what we **believe**, that keeps us walking in God's good favor. That's the works-righteousness trap that the Pharisees of Jesus' time had fallen into, and which many people still fall into today... thinking that God will just **have** to reward us because of all the various ways we've tried to be "good people" as we've made our way through life. But that most certainly is **not** what James is trying to say in this text. According to James, it's not a matter of "good works being more important than good faith..." it's a matter of "good faith **giving rise** to good works."

So, he's not saying that what we believe doesn't matter... nothing could be further from the truth. He knew as well as any member of that first-century Christian community that deep faith, and proper belief, and informed theological conviction were the lifeblood of life-changing personal discipleship. But what he **is** saying is that that life-changing personal discipleship cannot help but lead to acts of Christ-like charity... and godly love... and spiritual care, and kindness, and mercy. He's saying that a genuine relationship with Jesus should steer us **away** from worldliness, and self-centeredness, and the debilitating sinfulness that causes so much heartache and sorrow in our lives.

And it should steer us **toward** the kinds of things that Jesus Himself was so well-known for doing: having compassion for those who suffer... reaching out to those who've been marginalized and oppressed... forgiving the people who hurt Him... submitting His own desires to the will and wisdom of God... loving His neighbor as He loved Himself.

Understand that **none** of these "good works," in and of themselves, have the power to save us, or to put Almighty God in our debt, or to otherwise relieve us of the responsibility to place our faith and our trust in Christ. But they **do** have the power to make our faith more meaningful... and to help us become more spiritually mature... and to make a profound statement to the world around us that what we stand for as Christian disciples is much, much more than just a lot of pious pulpit pounding.

No, what we stand for is the truth of God, and the love of God, and the presence of God... alive and active in our midst. A profound and powerful presence which not only shapes our hearts and our minds... but our actions and attitudes as well. That, I think, is the point that James was trying to make... and it's a point which lies at the

foundation of all our efforts to be the men, women, and young people that Jesus has called us to be.

In our very relativistic and pluralistic time, when even the most important theological convictions are dismissed by so many as just an expression of personal taste or opinion... it's a daily temptation to allow our Christian faith to be reduced to a mere set of beliefs. As if believing certain things in a certain way... and holding those beliefs with a certain amount of conviction, is all that's required of me as a disciple of Jesus Christ. And I am then free to live as I please, and to do as I please, and to treat others as I please, and to generally make myself the center of the universe.

But James reminds us that, while what we believe really is important... belief is not the only thing that matters. What we go out and *do* with that belief also is a factor... and a very important factor at that. Because, it's in the "doing" of our faith that we grow... and mature... and realize more and more each day, the blessed good that our Lord desires to do for us! And that, at the end of the day, is what our discipleship is really all about.

So, are there areas in our life where our faith has grown a little too "heady?" Are there places in our workaday experience where what we "believe" has become a little distant and detached from what we actually "do?" Do we feel sometimes as if our Christian walk is too much like a "philosophy," and not enough like an honest to goodness "lifestyle?" Does our Heavenly Father seem to be a "concept" that we just think about, instead of a "companion" that we love, and worship, and serve?

If so, I invite you to take James' good counsel and embrace a faith that "works!" By doing so we can't earn God's love... but we will certainly be reminded of the love of God that's already there for us, just waiting for us to accept it, and find the hope and joy and meaning of our lives in it!

As we make our way into the week ahead, let's not be afraid to put our faith to work... and to joyfully make the most of every opportunity that comes our way to be the disciples God has called us to be! And our lives will be changed forever, for the better! That's the promise of the gospel! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!