

Faith That Works

James 2:14-17, 26
September 19, 2021

First Presbyterian Church
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Author and theologian C.S. Lewis once said, “Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that gives value to survival. The same can be said of faith and even the church. You can survive without it, but as Jesus proclaimed, you cannot truly live without faith, and a faith community.

This is why the Apostle James in our New Testament lesson says, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?” He’s saying that, like a friendship that’s not active, “faith without works is also dead,” or dying.

We are all in danger of our faith dying off little by little as the world pushes in more and more on our time and energy and resources. There’s just so much we can give, and it’s hard to know what’s most important, what’s a necessity and what we can safely hold off, when it comes to investing our time and talents and treasures.

To make his point about faith, James uses as an example our need for food and clothing, that which we put into our bodies to keep going in life and that which we put on to shield us from exposure to harmful things in life.

When James asks, “Can faith save you?” he’s talking about being saved in an earthly way, in a bodily way, in a food and clothing sort of way. He says, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”

It’s the same with being a part of a family of faith, a church. If you say that you are a Christian – and maybe even come to church once in awhile – but that’s the extent of your participation in the life of the church, than your faith is in danger of diminishing as is the church in our society.

If we don’t maintain an active presence and invest ourselves in the life of our church, how can we expect others to come alongside us, to become a part of our family of faith? And if a whole string of churches has members whose participation is waning, what’s to become of the Christian faith altogether? Hard questions, I know.

And yet, the survival of Christianity and the church truly is up to each and every one of us, and up to us as a whole. We live in a world that does, indeed, undermine the church’s place in society, either actively or by just crowding it out.

We live in a world where weekly church attendance is no longer the expectation or even something most people strive for. And we can all understand that – wanting to stay in bed on a Sunday morning.

Take for example the father who went in to wake his daughter one Sunday morning and tell her it was time to get ready for church. “I’m not going,” she said. “Why not?” he asked. “I’ll give you two good reasons,” she said. “One, I was up late last night, and two, I just want to stay in my PJs all day today. Her father said, “I’ll give YOU two good reasons why you SHOULD go to church. One, you’re a 34-year-old grown woman, and two, you’re the pastor!”

Yes, we all understand the pressure and pulls that individuals and families face these days. And that’s why we need to do everything we can to maintain the faith, maintain the church.

During our Summer Forum series titled “The Armor of God,” the video presenter Priscilla Shirer told about the necessity and use of each piece of armor that we are given as Christians. One of the pieces of armor that Shirer laid out for us is prayer. And in fact, she said that prayer is the essential tool or pieces of armor needed to protect and preserve the health and vitality of the church.

Without prayer, she said, the other pieces of Christian armor – which are truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the word of God – they’re not activated, they’re “not plugged in” so that we can access and use the power of the spiritual armor God has given us. Prayer is what activates our faith.

In Ephesians 6, (we) are called to, quote, “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can stand against the devil’s schemes,” those things that undermine our faith and our faith practices.

Shirer also quotes Mathew 21:12 where Jesus says, “My house shall be a house of prayer.” And then she points out that the house Jesus is talking about is the church. Not only that, but that the church is not this building, but rather, we are the church. All of us standing together as one are the church. The church is called to be a divine warrior standing as one fully armed against all that would attack or undermine our faith, who we are as a church and the faith practices we maintain – or at least try to maintain.

And then Shirer says this. She says, “To the extent that the church prays, that is the extent to which we will be able to access all the spiritual resources and divine authority and blessings that have been given to (us) to stand against” what’s pulling us down, what we as a church are up against these days.

“Prayer activates the armor” that we are given – the truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and word of God. Through prayer and the faith life it activates, we can and will see this and all communities of faith share in Christ’s victory over all that seeks to undermine our faith and diminish our churches.

The Christian Education Committee along with Cyndi Chamberlin and myself want to give you a place to go in putting on your armor of God, that spiritual armor of God is handing to you to overcome, yes, the struggles of your life, but also the struggles of this world that the church and the church alone is uniquely called and equipped to overcome and defeat, once and for all, through Jesus Christ.

If you want to be a part of that victory, we invite you to come together as a congregation and activate the armor of God- the truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and word of God. That opportunity to come together will primarily be on Wednesday evenings though we’ll have another gathering each week during the day for those who can’t make Wednesday evenings. And I know that includes our choir members and we’re mindful of that, and that’s why we’ll have an alternative day and time.

For those who can come on Wednesday evenings, we will gather at Westminster Hall, not for LOGOS but for Wednesday Night Live, which is a new offering of this church that includes LOGOS beginning October 13. We’ll have a shared meal, then break into age groups – Children, Youth and Adults-for study or other learning opportunity geared to our spiritual growth as individuals and , by extension, our growth as a church.

You’ll hear more about Wednesday Night Live during our All-Church box lunch Homecoming Celebration at Westminster Hall today immediately following worship. There you can also ask questions and make suggestions for Wednesday Night Live! We’ll tell you why we’re doing it, and how important it is to the life of this church and the life of our faith as individuals and as families.

You know, families and churches are like friendships. Research shows that, typically, adults have one or two “best” friends, four to six “close” friends, and 10 to 20 “casual” friends. But let’s be honest: Even these numbers seem high. Healthy friendships take time just to get going, up to three years according to some experts. Then they require nurturing and attentive planning, just like families and churches. And then, too often, just when the friendships are in place, they vanish, victims of some new component in the social equation: new job, new school, new baby, new spouse, whatever.

Friendships come and go and even family members grow up and move away, grow old and die, but the church is always here for you, a faithful and ever-present source of Christian friends and family that you can always rely on.

Church is always here for you, as long as you are here for the church, building her up and defending her against that which would pull her down and push her aside, in your life, in the life of your family, in our community and in our world.

We need the church and the church needs us because, quite simply, we are the church, and as the church, we are the only gospel, the only expression of Jesus Christ that the world will ever know. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord God, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us – for daily food, for health, for each breath we take, for freedom to choose, and for the gifts of your word, your power and your love.

Our hearts are truly overwhelmed, O God, when we consider how you have entrusted so much to us. May we be worthy of that trust. May we be a people who are unafraid to live as fully and as richly as you want us to live.

Help us, O God, as followers of Jesus, to multiply all that you have given us, to risk spreading your word and perhaps see it misunderstood, to love those whom others think worthy only of hate, to take chances by doing good to those who have not done good to us.

Make us people who share in both word and deed that which you have given to us.

We pray for the church gathered today, both here and around the world, that it may encourage all of its members to discover, develop and use all their gifts to your glory.

We pray for those who are struggling in body or in spirit, for those oppressed and heavy laden, for those in grief. We pray your healing touch upon those dealing with sickness and disease. Lord, God, minister by your Spirit – and by our care and concern – to all those for whom we have prayed and those we've been keeping in prayer in recent weeks. And for us, Lord, help us to walk faithfully in the path of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.