

This Is Us: Living Our Faith – Genuine Faith
James 2:1-7, 14-17
September 10, 2023
Pastor Tami Luckhardt

It takes practice and patience to get comfortable and confident doing something to the point where it becomes second nature. When I think about this, I remember the first time I got behind the wheel of a car. We were parked in the church's parking lot and he was telling me about all the gauges, lights, buttons and mirrors. I had so much to learn. Where do I look? What do I do first? I had to think about every little action that had to be taken like, switching gears. Do I step on the gas, the clutch or the break? When do I signal to turn? There's a lot involved in operating a car. It took a long time before I had that feeling of safety and confidence in what I was doing. And yet, now, I'm an experienced driver. And I bet you are too. In fact, you probably hopped in the car this morning, without giving it much thought and you ended up exactly where you intended to go, no problem. See that's the thing. Over time, it becomes second nature, and we don't have to overthink everything. We just intuitively know what to do, where to look, and how to react in certain traffic situations. It just begins to come naturally to us.

This is something we experience with a lot of different tasks like the first time you try a new recipe. You must carefully study it to be sure you understand it, and make sure you have all of the ingredients. Then you carefully measure everything out. But after a few times of doing it, you're consulting the recipe or carefully measuring less and less. My mother would say you just kind of "eyeball it." You feel confident in knowing what you're doing. It comes naturally.

Or think about that first day of school or the first day in a new job. You're trying to figure out all the ins and outs of the job, or the environment of the school or the work place and what's expected of you. It can be overwhelming on that first day but after some time has passed -- it becomes second nature. You develop a rhythm. You figure out how the social aspect of the school operates and what classroom we need to be in when, who your friends are. It takes time and experience to become more comfortable and more disciplined in doing things a certain way.

Now on the flip side, we can also get out of rhythm as well... and it takes practice to get back into that rhythm. We find ourselves overthinking things that we didn't need to overthink in the past. I recently began driving an electric car that has a different feel than a gas-powered car. For starters, it does not have a key that needs to be inserted or a button that needs to be pushed to start it. When you sit down in the driver's seat, it's on. And the touch of the accelerator and brake are very different! And the first time I got back into Jerry's gas engine car after just a few weeks, it felt weird. I had to think a bit more about where things were and what I needed to do to drive his car. It didn't come so naturally to me anymore.

Or as you begin to prepare a recipe that you haven't prepared in a long time. Like my mother's coffee cake. This recipe was one of the "must haves" that I took with me when I left home after college. Jerry and I used to make it a couple of times a month when our kids were living at home but now that it's just us, we don't make it very often because we can't eat/shouldn't eat a whole coffee cake all by ourselves. I used to have this recipe memorized but it no longer comes back to me naturally anymore. So, when the family comes over and I want to make this coffee cake, I must get this recipe card out of the box and try to get back into a routine.

Or as many of us experienced over the past couple of weeks, the return to school, whether for yourself or a loved one. Getting back into those familiar rhythms, those familiar ways of doing things. Our 9-year-old grandson, Oliver, bless his heart, worries about, and overthinks things whenever anything new is about to begin. Maybe you know someone like this is your life too.

The week before school began, he lost sleep and had a tummy ache for days but the minute they pulled up in front of the school last Tuesday, he saw some of his friends and remembered that he knew how to do this. It just took time and experience for him to get back into that rhythm. And it's the same way with a life of faith. Faith takes time and practice, whether we're at the beginning of our journey of faith or if we're trying to get back onto one.

Today we begin our four-part series, *This is Us, Living Our Faith*. In this series, we'll journey through the book of James together, exploring how to be active people of faith who practice what we preach. We'll look also at the teachings of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and how they so closely align with the writings of James. Wesley, like James, was a Do-er. He put his faith into action, hoping not only to transform his own faith life but the world around him as well. He and his brother, Charles, to keep themselves honest in this lifestyle of genuine faith in action, had these three general rules. Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. We're going to dive deeper into those rules in the weeks to come but it's important as we begin today to remember that our Methodist heritage compels us to a life of faith that is active. As many of us know from experience, sometimes we get *too* comfortable in our faith life. We put our faith in a box and only take it out at certain times and comfortable places like at church, home, around certain friends, and family. But faith is not a matter of convenience or just a thought or feeling that brings us comfort. It's to be a 24/7 commitment that we make to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. We should not reserve our faith for those times when it's convenient. Our faith, if true and genuine, will change the way we live.

This is the argument that James is trying to make in his letter to the early Christians. And in James, chapter one, he writes about welcoming the implanted word of God that has the power to save. That means coming to a place in our faith where our actions and understandings of faith become like second nature and influence the decisions we make each day, naturally living out our faith in accordance with Christ's teachings. But before we get into that, who is this James and how did he come to this place where the Word of God became impactful to his life?

Well, James was the brother of Jesus. Imagine with me, if you will, for just a minute what it must have felt like to be the brother Jesus. That had to be tough. There was absolutely no way he could ever have lived up to anything his brother did. Any of us who have ever lived in the shadow of a sibling have some sense of what James must have gone through in growing up with Jesus as a big brother. And he had close proximity to Jesus so he would have heard much of his teachings and his wisdom. So, it makes sense that this letter that references much of what Jesus taught his disciples, would have come from James. He didn't learn this second hand. He had a front row seat. And as a younger brother, he probably looked up to Jesus but we can also assume there might have been some resentment there as well, given Jesus' special status and role.

In the gospels, there are a few recorded instances of Jesus' interactions with his mother and siblings that were not very positive. Often it seemed as though Jesus' family thought he was odd and an embarrassment to his family. Maybe not from his mother, Mary, but one can certainly understand how his siblings might have felt that way because Jesus lived outside the box, constantly challenging the religious authorities and pushing cultural boundaries and that reflected poorly on the rest of them. All of this to say, it couldn't have been easy for James and took time for him to get to a point where he could put aside his jealousy, embarrassment, and resentment to fully accept Jesus' message for himself. But we know at some point things did change for James. Maybe it was after Jesus's death and resurrection when he approached him about leading the Jerusalem church. Or maybe it was at that point when James took a good,

long look at himself and realized that he needed to change the way that he was living his life so that it aligned with his faith.

In today's scripture, James is addressing a community of Christians that were treating their people poorly. It appeared that the wealthier attenders were given a warm welcome -- while poor visitors were more tolerated than welcomed. How often do we see people's social status or monetary worth, and either extend grace or overlook them based on it? This practice, both in the ancient world and now, is a reflection of worldly values. And James is saying that the church was holding onto too many worldly values and ignoring Jesus' fundamental teachings. He was upset by this and questioned the genuineness of their faith saying, "*Hasn't God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn't God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor...*" (vv. 2:5-6) James was accusing the church of sin by showing partiality and discriminating between the rich and the poor. As James saw it, in rejecting the poor, the church had rejected the teachings of Jesus, who did not discriminate but welcomed all, especially the poor and the outcast. And it's not just that God *loves* everyone, but God also promises to bring about justice for those who are oppressed.

If we understand this, we can begin to see that faith isn't just about transforming our own lives but a genuine faith, that understands God's kingdom and mission, compels us to *participate* in bringing transformation to the world. As James argues, "what good is it to have faith but not have works?" In other words, what good is it to hear God's Word and believe God's Word but not act on God's Word? What good is it to be a hear-er and not a do-er. It's like wishing a hungry person well but then doing absolutely nothing to address their hunger. James boldly declares, "faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity." (2:17)

Now to be clear, James isn't saying that our good deeds have the power to save us. It's not us, or our works, or deeds, or gifts but Christ alone who saves us. God does not weigh the balance between the good things that we do and the bad things we do and we just need to pray that in the end we come out on top. That's not how we are saved. Christ has *already* saved us through his sacrifice on the cross. And to be honest, we all fall short of God's mark and yet, God still offers us grace, over and over and over again. So, if we truly believe this and are committed to this, we will be compelled to take action in God's name and bear good fruit for the benefit of others.

So for John Wesley, for James, and all of us who follow the Wesleyan tradition, faith isn't just about personal salvation. It's also about the transformational power our faith can have in the world. Faith not only changes us, but it affects our social systems as well. Wesley said, *The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love, is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.* The kin(g)dom of God flips the value system of our broken world upside down. So, when we come together as people of faith, when we share to gospel message with others, we help God bring about change to our communities. We help God usher in the kingdom here and now.

For some of us, faith might just be this place of comfort where we're just going to sit on the sidelines and wait for Christ to return and make all things new. But as follower of Jesus, we are called to be more than spectators. We're called to put on the uniform and get in the game because God is inviting us to join in this transformational work. God isn't just waiting around but is actively working to make all things new again, right now. God does not want us to waste our time here in this earthly life, waiting around to hopefully, *someday* experience the joy of heaven because the joy and blessing of heaven are accessible to us right here, right now. As we join together in this kin(g)dom work, we see lives and communities changed and transformed. When we become active participants in our faith, we become part of God's transformational work.

So, I invite you to look within yourself this week and take a personal inventory. How do you access your faith life? Are you getting too comfortable and missing out on what God is doing or are you choosing to put your faith into action to the point that it becomes second nature? How might you activate or deepen your faith and help transform our community, both within the walls of this church, and in the world?

Maybe you've heard it said, "Faith is not a vacation but a vocation." And as disciples of Christ, we are called to live active lives of genuine faith and work together to be in ministry to our community. Just imagine what our community might look like if Messiah Church is known more for what we do in this community than just this beautiful sanctuary and gardens on the corner of County Road 6 and 101. What if, in our mission, we strive to see all people as whole persons, beloved children of God, rather than just identifying them with one of their needs so that when people look at us, the first thing that they think is, "see how they love." So, as we kick off this new season of ministry together, let's continue to strive to see others as God sees them and love them as God loves them. Let's not put our faith into a box or limit it to a building or a certain time and day of the week. Most importantly, let's put our faith in action until it becomes second nature, and we help God usher in the kingdom of heaven here and now. Let's pray: Lord, open our hearts and our minds to see that you call us to a deeper faith, an active faith, a genuine and living faith. Compel us to be do-ers of your Word and not just hear-ers, to be people who take action and share a genuine faith. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 10, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Faithful One, make me rich in faith. As I study your Word today, let my faith spill out from my heart into all I do and say. Let it feed and clothe, comfort, set free, reconcile, and make new. Let it change not only me but also others. You are faithful. Let me be faithful as well. Amen.

Monday, September 11

Scripture: James 2:1-7, 14-17

My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory. Imagine two people coming into your meeting. One has a gold ring and fine clothes, while the other is poor, dressed in filthy rags. Then suppose that you were to take special notice of the one wearing fine clothes, saying, "Here's an excellent place. Sit here." But to the poor person you say, "Stand over there"; or, "Here, sit at my feet." Wouldn't you have shown favoritism among yourselves and become evil-minded judges? My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn't God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn't God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Don't the wealthy make life difficult for you? Aren't they the ones who drag you into court? Aren't they the ones who insult the good name spoken over you at your baptism?

My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity.

Observation

James addresses the relationship between faith and good works. He argues that for faith to be alive, it has to be expressed in good works.

Application

As resurrection people, we are called to put our faith into action. Not as a way to earn salvation, for that is a gift from God, but as a natural result of being transformed into a new creation. How can you put your faith into action this week?

Prayer

God, even as a person of faith my life can be messy and difficult. I want to devote myself to faithful living. By reading your word and by your grace, may I live out what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, September 12

Scripture: 2 Kings 10:15, Romans 14:1-4

Jehu departed from there and encountered Rechab's son Jehonadab. Jehu greeted him, and asked, "Are you as committed to me as I am to you?" Jehonadab responded, "Yes, I am." "If so," said Jehu, "then give me your hand." So Jehonadab put out his hand, and Jehu pulled him up into the chariot.

Welcome the person who is weak in faith—but not in order to argue about differences of opinion. One person believes in eating everything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Those who eat must not look down on the ones who don't, and the ones who don't eat must not judge the ones who do, because God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servants? They stand or fall before their own Lord (and they will stand, because the Lord has the power to make them stand).

Observation

John Wesley's "Catholic Spirit" sermon asked: "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? ... Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences." (He used the root meaning of "catholic" – "including many different types of thing; universal." He did not mean the Roman Church, which in his day was a denomination that did not love Christians who thought differently.) Wesley taught us much about a "Catholic Spirit," but he did not originate this way of thinking and living. The idea is Scriptural, from ancient Israel to the apostle Paul.

Application

God made each person unique and wonderful (Psalm 139:14). Paul reminded the Roman Christians that since each person is unique, each person's spiritual journey is, too. Encouragement and accountability are vital for spiritual growth, but comparing others to ourselves and judging them is dangerous and destructive. How can you best help others on their personal journey of "knowing, loving, and serving God and others," without comparing or judging it by yours? Who has helped you in that way?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, your family is large and diverse. Give me your spirit of non-judgmental love (John 3:17), so that differences that do not bother you will not bother me either. Amen.

Wednesday, September 13

Scripture: Psalm 119:1-16

Those whose way is blameless—
 who walk in the LORD's Instruction—are truly happy!
Those who guard God's laws are truly happy!
 They seek God with all their hearts.
They don't even do anything wrong!
 They walk in God's ways.
God, you have ordered that your decrees
 should be kept most carefully.
How I wish my ways were strong
 when it comes to keeping your statutes!
Then I wouldn't be ashamed
 when I examine all your commandments.
I will give thanks to you with a heart that does right
 as I learn your righteous rules.
I will keep your statutes.
 Please don't leave me all alone!
How can young people keep their paths pure?
 By guarding them according to what you've said.
I have sought you with all my heart.
 Don't let me stray from any of your commandments!
I keep your word close, in my heart,
 so that I won't sin against you.
You, LORD, are to be blessed!
 Teach me your statutes.
I will declare out loud
 all the rules you have spoken.
I rejoice in the content of your laws
 as if I were rejoicing over great wealth.
I will think about your precepts
 and examine all your paths.
I will delight in your statutes;
 I will not forget what you have said.

Observation

It was ironic that his critics called Wesley an unruly agitator. He did reach people in atypical ways that shocked some staid British clergymen, but he was in fact a very disciplined man. It's no surprise to find that, in the same spirit as the writer of Psalm 119, he wrote in his journal, "About fifty of us being met, the Rules of the Society were read over and carefully considered one by one; but we did not find any that could be spared. So we all agreed to abide by them all and to recommend them with our might."

Application

Bishop Reuben Job, in his book *Three Simple Rules*, paraphrased the three General Rules as "do no harm," "do all the good you can," and "stay in love with God." How can these rules (which Wesley never claimed were on the same level as God's law in the Bible) help you live into the reality the psalmist expressed: "I will give thanks to you with a heart that does right as I learn your righteous rules" (verse 7)?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for accepting me just as I am. Now guide me as, in grateful response to your love, I seek to use these rules to guide me in living more faithfully. Amen.

Thursday, September 14

Scripture: Psalm 68:3-6

But let the righteous be glad
and celebrate before God.
Let them rejoice with gladness!
Sing to God! Sing praises to his name!
Exalt the one who rides the clouds!
The LORD is his name.
Celebrate before him!
Father of orphans and defender of widows
is God in his holy habitation.
God settles the lonely in their homes;
he sets prisoners free with happiness,
but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

Observation

At one point, John Wesley's parents refused to live together for 12 months, because they disagreed on who ought to be king of England. Augustine Birrell noted wryly, "If John Wesley was occasionally a little pig-headed, need one wonder?" Like many of us, Wesley bore scars from his flawed family. He loved his parents, but he put his ultimate trust in God, who said through the psalmist that he is the uniquely reliable parent for even the orphaned or lonely.

Application

Part of our faith heritage from John Wesley is the faith that we are God's voice, God's hands and feet, in a hurting world. In what ways can you join in God's work of blessing orphans, widows, the lonely and prisoners? Do you know anyone who may not be an "orphan" or "widow" in the concrete sense of the term, but who you could bless by extending God's love and care?

Prayer

O God, the psalmist said you are "Father of orphans and defender of widows." Thank you for always being with me. Give me eyes to see others who are hurting, and use me to bless them with your love and caring. Amen.

Friday, September 15

Scripture: Romans 8:18-28

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience. In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness.

We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Observation

John Wesley's early years were tough. His family was poor, and had a mix of strengths and weaknesses. Religious and political divisions sowed hatred in England, and with a huge gap between rich and poor, many people had given up faith. Yet many of those very factors helped shape the man he became--a man who for around 40 years rode an estimated 8,000 miles per year on horseback, preached an estimated 1,000 sermons per year, and dramatically changed England (and America, too) for the better. He loved God, and God worked all things for good in his influential life, as Romans 8:28 promised.

Application

Today's scripture does not say, as people sometimes think, that "all things" are good— because they're not. It says God, who is always good, can take all things, even the painful and difficult ones, and bend them to serve a good purpose in our life, if we are willing to put them in God's hands. Can you look back and see how God has brought good out of hard things you have faced? What are you facing right now that is painful, frustrating or scary? Spend time honestly telling God how hard those things are, and expressing trust that, in God's own timing, he can bring good for you out of them.

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for being with me in good times and bad. Thank you for using your power to bring good out of even the bad times I face. Teach me to trust you more and more as I journey through life. Amen.

Saturday, September 16

Scripture: Luke 14:12-24

Then Jesus said to the person who had invited him, "When you host a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. And you will be blessed because they can't repay you. Instead, you will be repaid when the just are resurrected." When one of the dinner guests heard Jesus' remarks, he said to Jesus, "Happy are those who will feast in God's kingdom." Jesus replied, "A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, 'Come! The dinner is now ready.' One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, 'I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I bought five teams of oxen, and I'm going to check on them. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.' The servant said, 'Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.' The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Observation

Jesus lived among many religious people who recoiled at the idea of sharing God's kingdom with "sinners" (a term they defined roughly as "not as good as I am"). To some of them, Jesus told a shocking story about a king who invited even the town's street people to a royal banquet. In that spirit, John Wesley and the early Methodists preached faith to people of all social classes. In 1739, Wesley wrote ironically in his journal about his own inner struggle with his "upright" background: "At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people."

Application

Priest and writer Brennan Manning loved to quote the college student who, after reading the gospels, said, "Wow—God sure has a thing for ragamuffins." Learning about John Wesley's conversion experience and the powerful preaching that followed poses two very personal questions. First, can you see the degree to which you are a ragamuffin before God, one more person who desperately and gratefully needs God's grace and mercy? Second, are you open to inviting and welcoming into God's kingdom the ragamuffins of all kinds who live around you, even if at first you might feel a bit uncomfortable in their company?

Prayer

Lord God, you are an actively loving, seeking God. Thank you for calling me to be one of your human partners in the work of going into the highways and back alleys, so that your heavenly banquet may be full. Amen.