

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
September 6, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Faith at Work,

Proverbs 22:1–2, 8–9, 22–23, James 2:1–17, Mark 7:24–37

Last week, Roger preached an excellent sermon on, “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” from James 1:22. This is a common theme in the Letter from James, the brother of Jesus. As you heard Roger read from today’s Epistle Lesson, James makes the same point with a slight twist in 2:14, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?” Today’s scripture lessons expand on this truth with some specific instances in mind.

Let us begin with the baptisms of Dylan Lewis Hume and Emery Anna Schnick. We have told them that they have been claimed by God, sealed to God, freed by God from sin and death, united with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection; and by water and the Holy Spirit made members of the church, the body of Christ, and joined to Christ’s ministry of love, peace, and justice. These are wonderful promises of faith made to these children today. They were made to you and me when we were baptized.

Yet, these faith promises are just theoretical words unless they are put into action. They have no power unless they are backed by the actions of the God who created us. God took steps to give substance to his words of salvation. God came to earth in Jesus Christ. He had Jesus teach us about him and live a life that illustrated exactly how God wants us to live. Then he had Jesus suffer a horrible death on the cross to erase our sins, and finally God raised him from the dead to assure us of everlasting life. As we will experience in the communion meal, Jesus now dwells within us in spiritual form. To give the words of faith we proclaimed in Dylan’s and Emery’s baptisms substance, God put this faith to work.

God’s faith at work was not a mere spectator event where we just sit and watch. Nor did God do what he did so we could simply recite creeds or preach sermons about his faith at work. God in Jesus Christ did what he did to involve us with him in putting our faith to work. If Dylan’s and Emery’s parents, family, friends and we fellow Christians are serious about their baptisms, we will take the actions we promised to do to teach them in word and deed about the meaning of their baptism so that they too might one day confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and —put their faith to work so that whomever they know and meet will also want to follow Jesus. God gave us his love, his grace, his life, his heart in Jesus Christ and the gift of faith in him so that we could join him in putting it all to work.

This is the essence of the lessons from the scriptures read today, our faith in God in Jesus Christ must be put to work with an emphasis on how we treat other people. Today’s lessons make it very clear that God considers everyone equally and so must we as we put our faith to work. Proverbs 2 says, “The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.” Even the founding fathers of this country promoted this idea in the Declaration of Independence, “All men are created equal.” We are still trying to get a few men and women to understand that “men” in this

declaration also includes the equal treatment of women. We are making progress toward that end. Even the Apostle Paul understood this equality before God in writing in Galatians 3, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." God wants us to join him in putting our faith in Jesus Christ to work by treating others equally, just as he does.

The truth is that for the people of God in the time of Solomon when Proverbs was written, the early Christians in the time of James and even for Jesus, putting our faith in God to work by treating others equally is not an easy task. Nor is it easy to do today. The problem was and still is favoritism, especially amongst the people of God where it should not exist, but it does because we still sin. The rich and powerful were and are favored over the poor and the powerless. People who are different were and are shunned, ignored or mistreated. This violates how God wants us to practice our faith in him. This forces God to come to the defense of those who are mistreated and punish those who are the violators. Proverbs 2 :22-23 said it well, "Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them." Such favoritism can cause people to turn away from Jesus Christ.

"A deplorable incident of favoritism occurred in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. He said in his autobiography that during his student days he was interested in the Bible. Deeply touched by reading the gospels, he seriously considered becoming a convert. Christianity seemed to offer the real solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. One Sunday he went to a church to see the minister and ask for instruction on the way of salvation and other Christian doctrines. But when he entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused him a seat and suggested that he go and worship with his own people. He left and never went back. 'If Christians have caste differences also,' he said to himself, 'I might as well remain a Hindu.' As believers we must, "weed from our hearts the evil root of racial prejudice before it yields the same bitter fruit." Such favoritism does great damage to our spiritual and human relationships. Emphasis on Line

Illustrations

Such damage from favoritism almost occurred when a Gentile woman asked Jesus to heal her daughter as we heard in the very honest and troubling passage from Mark 7. At the time, Jesus was trying to get away from his Jewish community for some well earned rest by traveling to a Gentile land. His ministry focus had been sharing the good news of God's love and salvation to the Jews, alone. So when the Gentile woman disturbed Jesus' rest and focus he argued with her about the attention she required from him and the way in which she was diverting his attention from what he thought was his singular mission. For this situation, we must remember that Jesus was God and man with us. So it was the human side of the Jewish Jesus that struggled with favoritism when the Gentile woman asked him for help in healing her daughter. By God's grace, the Gentile woman out argued Jesus and he healed the daughter from a distance. In this confrontation, Jesus realized that his Father in heaven also wanted his salvation spread to the Gentiles. Thank God Jesus was a quick learner; for he went on to heal a Gentile man who was deaf, and many other Gentiles after that. Even the human side of the Jewish Jesus had to learn from a Gentile mother that God has no

favorites.

This story only strengthens the truth that God wants us to join him in putting our faith in Jesus Christ to work by treating others equally, just as he does. We must teach this to Dylan and Emory and all our children in word and deed. When we do treat people equally marvelous things occur. Gentiles as well as Jews were and are still healed by Jesus. Gentiles like you and me as well as Jews are included in the Kingdom of God. When I was a college student in California, PA, there was a great deal of tension between the town's people and the college students. The Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, John Rankin, his wife, Bobbi and the church members did all they could to include college students in the worship and fellowship of the church. They even invited us to their homes for meals. This inclusiveness further inspired me to go into the Presbyterian ministry. I have seen you, the members of this church, reach out to include the poor stranger who walks into this sanctuary, even in the middle of a service. You have invited them to fellowship time and have introduced them to me so they knew who the pastor was. As Roger pointed out in last week's sermon, you have overcome stereotypes in your work with families in the Cheyenne Interfaith Hospitality network. You have responded time after time with volunteer labor and funds to help the poor and homeless. You have practiced Proverbs 2 :9, "Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor." You know that "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and (God's) favor (or grace) is better than silver or gold." Yes, let us put our faith to work by joining God in treating people equally, and then when Dylan, Emory and our other children see our faith at work they will want to join us in serving Jesus Christ and all God's children in the same way we do.