

# Faith that Works 1: *Be Doers of the Word*

By  
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from the pulpit of  
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Rally Day

Mark 7:1-8,14-15

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, <sup>2</sup>they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. <sup>3</sup>(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>4</sup>and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) <sup>5</sup>So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” <sup>6</sup>He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;  
<sup>7</sup>in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

<sup>8</sup>You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

<sup>14</sup>Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

James 1:19-27, 2:8

<sup>19</sup>You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. <sup>21</sup>Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. <sup>22</sup>But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup>For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup>for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup>But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. <sup>26</sup>If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. *In the next few verses James addresses the way people take more notice of the rich than the poor whereas God chooses the poor as heirs of the kingdom of God. Then James calls the community to respect all people saying:* <sup>8</sup>You do well IF you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Just a month ago, a story in a major newspaper about churches in the United States began like this: “Lisa Tofano was baptized, confirmed and married in Good Shepherd Lutheran Church on Lake Opeka, Illinois. When she and her husband, John, visited the church last fall, however, it was not to worship but rather to celebrate their 34<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary at what the church had become: Foxtail on the Lake, a restaurant.” The article went on to recount while hundreds of churches across the country sit empty, many are being repurposed into shopping venues, art galleries, condominiums and restaurants. I, of course, wondered if the writer of the article even noticed the biblical irony of the opening example – that the Good Shepherd Church became the Foxtail restaurant, that the image of God who cares for the sheep had been replaced by the sly fox for whom a young lamb is a tasty supper.

Putting my snarky biblical observation aside, the article went on to detail the construction challenges of turning a church building into a restaurant or theater or hotel or whatever. It observed that most renovations of once religious buildings do try to preserve some essential quality of the original. “Most try to retain some reference or vestige of the church that the building once housed,” an architect from Austin, Texas, said such as the shape of a rose window, some parts of stained glass, even incorporating a cross into a new design. Hotel Peter and Paul in New Orleans, for example, has kept side altars, stained glass and original light fixtures, adding character to the venue now used for bar mitzvahs and weddings. Another irony, I suppose, that such events once held within synagogues and churches take place now in a hotel venue adorned with religious relics.<sup>1</sup>

If a congregation ceases to be viable, and a church has to close, I think it’s lovely that these historic buildings are being repurposed rather than demolished, however this trend does make you wonder about the viability of religious practice these days. Of course the decline of

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Rosen, “As Hundreds of Churches Sit Empty, Some Become Malls and Restaurants,” *New York Times*, Aug. 4, 2024.

religious affiliation has been happening for decades. In the late 1940's seventy-six percent of Americans belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, but today that number has dropped to forty-seven percent – by a full third of the population. The pandemic, of course, sped up the drop in worship attendance; it may be some time before we know its full effects on religious institutions.

So we at Bryn Mawr – can give thanks for a continuing vibrant and vital congregational life. Post-pandemic our in-person attendance continues to grow; and we have over 300 people who join us by livestream every week. But - I dare say we cannot take church vitality for granted. On this day of celebration as we begin a new program year, you could say that by comparison to the Foxtail Restaurant and the Peter and Paul Hotel, we at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church are doing quite well. Amid this creeping decline of Mainline Christianity we are still a church! But not because we are in the business of building preservation!

What makes us a church – of course - is: our coming together to worship God; our growth as a spiritual community of faith; our faithfulness to the call of Jesus Christ; and our living the faith by loving God and neighbor in our daily lives wherever they take us. As one keen observer recently noted: “When Christianity is not working, what we care about is Christianity. When Christianity is working, what we care about is our neighbor.”<sup>2</sup>

The Letter of James was written to encourage the early Christian community for a working faith. Offering practical guidelines that could be applied to any of the Jewish Christian communities dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world, James addresses a church trying to find its footing, trying to survive against the odds, trying to be faithful to God in practical ways, trying to live a faith that works. In a word, James was written in a time not unlike our time.

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<sup>2</sup> John Thatamanil, @thehappygivers.

Now – at the outset of this series it must be said that in the history of Christian piety, James was often pushed aside by a preference for the Letters of Paul. Notably the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther called James a “letter of straw.” Luther favored Paul’s emphasis on faith as the unmerited gift of God, and human righteousness a sole act of God’s doing not based on our own actions. Luther dismissed James’ saying “Faith without works is dead,” as contrary to his understanding of God’s grace.

However, more contemporary biblical scholars argue that this tendency to focus on the relevance of James only in contrast to the teachings of Paul overshadows the theological treasure contained in this letter. The Book of James, they argue, offers helpful, no-nonsense, proverbial wisdom for discipleship and service, for practicing the faith.<sup>3</sup> Welcome the Word God has implanted within you James implores, and “Be doers of the word.” Let your life show forth what you believe about God who has taught us to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

These verses about being doers of the word have a sermonic quality as if James were preaching on the gospel reading we heard earlier. Jesus was criticizing a group of Pharisees – not for following their laws about dietary customs – but because these religious practices about what and how they were eating had no outward expression. A well-rounded faith is present in all of life; what we believe privately must be seen publicly.

James reminds us that faith is something we do through our ethics and in our actions. Look in the mirror, James says, and remember that what is reflected back is an image of God. Don’t forget that when you walk outside to live your life in the public square. Our gathering here inside this beautiful worshipful space is sacred – to be sure – but the experience of God in worship cannot be left behind and forgotten after Sunday. The faith God gives us is one in the same with what people around us see us

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<sup>3</sup> Magrey R. DeVega, *A Preachers’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series*, p. 142.

doing. As a matter of fact, faith itself is often found in the doing of it long before it even makes sense in the believing about it.

A friend of mine shared with our preaching group a story of one of her church members. She called him Kevin and said she first got to know him as a reluctant church-goer. He'd long since left the church of his upbringing when he married, and his wife coaxed him to attend with her. As newlyweds she said it was important to her that they attend worship together, and when they had children to raise them in the church. So Kevin attended with his wife but later admitted to his pastor that the liturgy, readings and sermons did little to move him and he felt no real sense of who we call God, as he put it. He was an engineer, he said, used to solving problems in concrete ways, and he had little use for the language of an intangible deity or mystery.

Then, sadly, before those newlyweds could have those children they had dreamed of, Kevin's wife called it quits on the marriage. She had reconnected with an old flame over Facebook and moved away leaving him for another. So now alone – Kevin continued to try on church. Because worship wasn't doing enough for him, he signed up for the Saturday afternoon trips downtown to feed the homeless. In warm weather in a city park; in winter out of a former YMCA gym. When his group of church folks obtained the rights to turn the old Y into a winter night shelter, Kevin volunteered regularly to spend the night. The lonely emptiness he felt after the unexpected dissolution of his marriage began to find a sense of community in service among his homeless neighbors and his fellow volunteers. He was *doing the word*. And in so doing, way down the road, Kevin discovered a faith that worked for him.

My preacher friend shared his slow revelation writing, "Over long months, over a few years, he discovered a greater clarity of purpose he would come to understand as Christian discipleship. Through work as basic as setting out cots, scooping up and plating spaghetti, monitoring a line to the showers, and talking to guys who live on the streets about nothing and everything, Kevin began to experience God's grace, mercy,

forgiveness and loving kindness.” He was *doing the word* long before believing it.

How does James put it?

*But those who look into the perfect law,  
the law of liberty, and persevere,  
being not hearers who forget  
but doers who act –  
they will be blessed in their doing.*

You know, we may be watching the slow decline of Mainline Christianity in our country, and there is admittedly grief about it – especially for those whose own congregations have shrunk to a point beyond viability. But remember – we are a resurrection people. Just like the 1<sup>st</sup> century church of James, we are a resurrection church! Holding those newsworthy stories about church buildings being converted into restaurants and hotels alongside the Letter of James, we find a kind of practical wisdom that fills us with hope for the church of Christ and our being a vital part of it. What happens when we gather here is mostly an affirmation of what is already happening out there – where the Spirit of the Living Christ is leading us: to be quick to listen and slow to speak; to make no distinction between rich and poor; to love our neighbor as ourselves; to be not hearers only; but also doers of the word.

AMEN.