

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“TESTIMONY TO A VIBRANT FAITH”  
James 2:14-18  
September 13, 2009  
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

The challenge we face as Christians is to live out our faith to the extent that we are blessed and strengthened to the point where we may bless and strengthen others in their need.

We are amused by the way ancient peoples made their gods in their own image. Their gods looked and lived very much like those who worshiped them. But we are hardly less guilty when we think of God in ethnic and political terms. Idolatry can be subtle, but it always involves reducing God to our own perspectives and preferences.

We are created with a need for faith. Not many people would be inclined to deny the importance of faith. Faith is much to be desired if life is to be rich and full. Deep in us is a yearning to know that we are not the whole story about ourselves. There is this primal anxiety that life may be meaningless and the universe unfriendly. It is normal to have faith.

While few would deny the value of faith, it needs to be said that there are all kinds of faith. You can have faith in the God of the Bible, or you can have faith in the Great Pumpkin. Some people have faith in the daily horoscope, others in witchcraft, and still others in human rationality. The last of the three, by the way, may be as questionable as the first two! We need to know what people mean when they say, “**Have faith.**” They may be saying simply, “**Believe in yourself.**” They may mean, “**Be optimistic about the future,**” or, “**Practice positive thinking.**” Some faiths are worthy, and some do not merit any respect at all. Some faiths do not reflect reality, but distort it. Some faiths are dangerous. There are parents whose

faith rules out modern medicine which may cause the death of their child. Francis Bacon said we prefer to believe what we prefer to be true. But faith must be more honest and realistic than this. There is true faith and there is false faith.

Some voices from within the church may insist that true faith rests on orthodox belief. Our beliefs must be correct or true. Of course, right belief is very important. If I believe I can fly, I will only get one chance to prove it! It is far better to be a fervent believer in the law of gravity. Right belief is indispensable to faith. It is important that we believe the right things about God, about our world, about ourselves, about each other. Right belief separates true faith from false faith. Right belief, however, as important as it is, is not synonymous with true faith. Biblical religion, to be sure, distinguishes between true and false faith. But it is even more concerned with the difference between a vibrant or living faith and a dead faith.

Today's lesson from James was once illustrated by Charles Schulz, creator of "**Peanuts.**" It is winter and the Peanuts' gang is headed to school. They are dressed in parkas, mittens, snow shoes, and scarves. They see Snoopy sitting alone and shivering on the ice and snow. They stop and look at him as if wondering if there is something they should do for him. Finally, Charlie Brown raises his hand and says, "**Peace be with you.**" Then the kids trudge on. In the last frame Snoopy is watching them go, and still shivering. He has a big question mark over his head, as if he is thinking: "**What was that all about?**" That is the point at which we must begin to rethink church.

James says if someone is cold and hungry, and you say to them, "***Go in peace, be warmed and filled,***" without giving them clothing and food, what does it profit? Faith without good works, insists James, is a dead faith. But what is response when some people have faith and some have works? James says, "***Show me your faith apart from your works, and by my works I will show you my faith.***" In other words, faith without action is a cold, lifeless orthodoxy. Then James raises a monumental question, perhaps even unthinkable. He makes a case for the orthodoxy of the devil! If right believing is what separates true faith from false faith, then the devil and his minions have the true faith. They know all about God, and shudder in their knowledge. If demons can be orthodox, orthodoxy alone cannot count for much. It certainly does not represent a vibrant living faith as opposed to a dead faith.

This is consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Jesus cared what people thought and believed. He was a teacher, and was concerned that people know the truth. He spent a lot of time straightening out people's beliefs. But Jesus never made orthodoxy the test of faith. Rather, Jesus talked about fruit, something living. Jesus said the test of faith is the fruit you produce. ***“Beware of false prophets,”*** he said, ***“who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?”*** (Mt 7)

The most terrible tragedy to befall the church, both in the past and today, is the tendency to deny with our lives what we profess with our lips. It was true in ancient Israel. It was true in the congregations of the New Testament. It is true today. There are too many of us who want the benefits of believing in Christ without the obligations of right living. There are far too many of us who make faith only a head trip. There are too many of us who give faith a bad name. A vibrant faith is a faith that is lived.

Baptists had a prophet in Carlyle Marney, until they kicked him out! Marney once said that he had quit asking God to fix anything in the Carolinas. Why? He was ashamed to ask, because God has had a majority of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians in that region for two hundred years. ***“If we had had a mind to,”*** he said, ***“we could have whipped racism, and poverty, and oppression, and corruption in business and politics years ago.”*** Now that's a Vibrant faith!

God's gift of grace and our self-giving service to others are two dimensions in the single portrait of a vibrant living faith. Faith and works are partners, not rivals. They are inseparably linked together. Faith does not exist apart from good works, and good works cannot endure apart from faith. According to James, ***“pure religion”*** requires good works, ***“for as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead.”*** (2:26)

Living faith is personified in Jesus himself. Dead faith is represented by the scribes and Pharisees. They had reduced faith to an intricate set of rules and rituals, but their system was totally irrelevant to the concerns of real life. Laws alone have little life-giving power, but God's spirit generates life. Both James and Jesus understood faith as spiritual and relational, as the center of a person's life, not as a set of rules. When religion becomes mere legalism, it is lifeless. Christ invites us to a vibrant living faith.

I invite you into the kingdom of God where all people are welcome. If you want to share in a faith where people are transformed by love, come grow your spirit with us. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.