

"The Christian Equation"

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First Presbyterian Church
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**Old Testament Lesson - Deuteronomy 6:4-9
New Testament Lesson – James 2:14-17, 21-26**

The story goes that one of the bears in a traveling circus was given a special job unlike any of the performing bears. His only role was to sit or pace around in a 9-by-9-foot cage that would be placed beside the road near the entrance to the circus. He was a living billboard. People would see him and then they'd know that the circus was in town. All he ever did, day in and day out, was walk around in a square – 9 feet in each direction. As things turned out, this was not a very well-run circus and eventually it went bankrupt; all the equipment was sold off, the performers were let go, and the animals were either sold to other circuses or to the zoo. Since our bear had no value as a performer, he was shipped off to the zoo. And by a great stroke of fortune, it was one of those zoos with animal enclosures that resemble natural habitats; no cages and plenty of room to roam. So there the bear was – free to wander within a large enclosure – and yet for the remainder of his life, that bear never ventured beyond a 9-foot by 9-foot area, even though, the only bars were the ones in his mind and spirit. Out of habit and a sense of hopelessness, those imaginary bars proved to be as real for that bear as the ones from his previous life with the circus.¹

In our New Testament lesson, the Apostle James tells us “just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.” And the story of that bear shows us that the opposite is just as true; works without faith are also dead. The bear had no faith to move beyond what he knew and was used to. In other words, if we try to separate our actions from our faith or our faith from our actions, neither one of them amounts to much, and certainly not what God would have for us. God wants us to let our faith guide our actions and let our actions reflect our faith. But too often we're like that bear tied to our old, well-worn patterns of daily life. Or maybe it's our way of thinking or feeling about things that has us stuck, trapped in our thoughts and feelings about a strained relationship with a brother or sister, child or parent, trapped by a long-standing difference of opinion with your spouse, stuck behind the line you've drawn in your mind – the line we all draw – when it comes to how much you're willing to do at work, around the house, or even in service through the church or a community assistance program.

¹ Based on the writing of Steve Edington in “When life calls us back,” uunashua.org/sermons/whenlifecallsusback.shtml. Retrieved Sept. 19, 2012.

Now, it's true that our life-long practices and outlooks can be very helpful and comfortable for us. But if we leave them unexamined or cling to them out of habit, indifference, or even hopelessness, then we're leaving very little room for God to work in our lives. When we're afraid to break out of our old patterns, we put up iron bars in our minds and in our spirit that hold us back just as much as that bear who couldn't claim and enjoy the new life he was offered.

So, what might we do or where might we turn to reexamine what's holding us back in life? Well, James would say we should be reexamining our relationship with what we believe and how that shapes or fails to shape our actions. To help us do that, James asks us, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but (you) do not have works? Can faith save you? 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? So faith," says James, "by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

James is telling us – telling you and telling me – that what you do – what I do – is just as important as what we believe as Christians. And in fact, what we do, says James, must be informed by what we believe – by our faith – if our actions are to have any real life to them. And according to James, the opposite is also true – what we believe is "dead" or inactive if we don't use it to guide our actions. We can think of this as the Christian Equation. For the mathematically minded among us (and believe me that's not me), but here it goes; the Christian Equation according to James is ***Faith minus Works equals Dead*** or Inactive AND the Body (what we might think of as "works") minus the Spirit (or our faith) is also Dead or Inactive, when it comes to truly being engaged in life.

So how can that be said differently for the majority of us who are not mathematically minded? Here it goes: to be truly alive we need both works and faith, both body and spirit. And both must be guided equally by God. Our biggest problems arise when we – as individuals, as churches, as nations, as humanity – allow our actions to go forward as if we have no true faith or convictions. Or equally, if we have faith and or hold on to our principles but allow our actions to run contrary, then our faith and principles are as inactive as if they were dead or nonexistent.

So how do we get our faith in line with our actions, and our actions to reflect our faith? Well, we do that by going back to our friendly circus bear and his 9-foot cage, the second one, I mean, the cage without any iron bars or cement walls. It was habit, resignation, hopelessness and a lack of conviction or drive that kept that bear from enjoying all that life had to offer him. And he just couldn't see it.

For us, to get our faith and our actions better aligned with one another, we first need to see it, we need to step back and examine each of them – our faith and what we believe, and our actions and what we say and do.

Those of you here who journal may want to make two lists – the hallmarks of your faith on one side – honesty, love, commitment, courage, strength, or whatever –and a corresponding action that doesn't line up with that faith

value— lying, hateful thoughts or feelings, laziness, fear, or spiritual weakness— put those on the other side of the list. So if honesty is on your faith values list, the corresponding action or habit that does not reflect that faith value might be lying, if that's something you catch yourself doing. Make Sense? But what if you're not a list-maker? Well, if you're more given to prayer and contemplation, then forget about making a list; meditation or silent reflection may be your thing. Pray or meditate about where your faith and your works, don't align. Or, some of us may enjoy talking things out. If that's you, find an accountability partner to meet with once a week or at least every month – someone who can hold your faith in mind as you talk about what's been happening in your life. I'm available if you need someone or need a referral to a spiritual advisor or life coach. Whatever practice you adopt, the key for any of this is honesty. If we're not willing to be honest with ourselves before God and hopefully neighbor, then we will find ourselves stuck in a rut of our own making. And maybe you're OK with that. Really. Maybe things are OK just as they are. Ruts can be comfortable places. They just don't lead us anywhere new – and they certainly don't allow room for God to further work in a person's life. For instance, a woman walks up to a little old man rocking in a chair on his porch. "I couldn't help noticing, she said, how happy you look," "What's your secret?" "I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day," he said. "I drink a case of whiskey a week, eat fatty foods and never exercise." "That's amazing," said the woman. "How old are you?" "Twenty-six." Bad habits; getting into a rut and not being willing to make a change. These things lead us to hopelessness and eventually death – spiritually if not also physically. But God leads us to life. And all we have to do is follow. But that's easier said than done. And James knows this. When James looks for an example to show us what it's like to follow God, he turns to Abraham's near sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac. What greater sacrifice could one make? And also, Rahab whose courage allowed her to guide God's people to safety. It takes sacrifice and courage for us to follow God. As James says, we can't just say to people – or to ourselves – "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill" when we're starving ourselves spiritually or depriving others of material necessities. We can't just fool ourselves into thinking that saying the right thing or even believing the right thing is going to be enough. In order to follow God and to receive the life God promises us we need to practice what we preach. It's just like what you remember learning your times tables – practice, practice, practice until it comes naturally. And the best way to practice is to follow **the Christian Equation** – let our Faith be combined with our Works and our Works be guided by our Faith. And then trust that in faith, God will provide, Jesus will guide, and the Spirit will strengthen us in life. I don't know what you think of when you think of something in your life that is out of alignment with your faith – a place or person or activity that just doesn't quite line up with what your faith is telling you. Or maybe it's a belief or principled conviction that never seems to be reflected in your day-to-day life. Wherever it shows up in your life

and whatever it is that is out of alignment, now is your opportunity to name it, to acknowledge within yourself that certain something that has your faith and your works out of sync. Take a moment now. Think about. It: An action or belief that is out of synch in your life (wait) Do you have something? Name it in your heart of hearts. (wait) Allow God to speak to your soul and listen to what is said. Do that now. (wait)

OK, if so, now hang onto to it; and if not continue to think about it. Tuck that thought, that belief, that habit or relationship or that “out of synch action or activity” away in your mind, and then jot it down privately, either now or sometime before driving away or leaving church today. And then carry it around with you. Don't let it go. Keep it alive, the thought of it as distasteful as it might be to hang onto it until you can deal with it. And then find the courage to speak to another human being, journal about it or pray about it.

And then follow God's leading. Let God help you move past it. Allow Christ to guide you. If you muster the courage to look honestly at your life and ask God to give you the strength you need to make whatever sacrifice might be needed to move to the next level, if you do that – if I do that- then scripture tells us that God is there for us. God will take us from death into life, from a 9-by-9 cage of your own making into the expanse of the wide open spaces, from a lifeless faith to a faithful life lived well.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Creator God, parent of us all, we give you thanks for all the things you have given us that make our lives full: our family and friends, our church and our school or job or place of services. We know we have been called to serve, and yet in the face of worldly unrest and tragedy, mayhem and murder, illness and death, we acknowledge we sometimes feel powerless. We realize the difficulties we have in being faithful servants and we wonder if we are, indeed, able to walk in your footsteps. At such times, keep us mindful that it is not all up to us. Help us to remember that the source of our service is also the source of our strength and hope, the one called Jesus, whom alone we worship and serve. We pray, also, for those whose sense of service is limited by illness, poverty, or debilitating circumstance. Help them to know that no service goes unnoticed or is without merit, and that the greatest service of all is simply loving you with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our might. And for those whose service in this life has reached its fullness, we pray your peace that they may rest well and once united with you, that their loved ones would know their continued presence in your eternal spirit. For we know, O God, that you are with us always – even to the end of time. So we pray in the sure knowledge that your love for us never lets us go. We pray as your beloved children, and we use the words given to us by the one whom we ultimately serve, Jesus Christ, who taught to pray, 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.