

Putting Your Faith Into Practice

3rd of 3 sermons on “Putting Your Faith Into Practice”

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- 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5a (Good News Translation) For we remember before our God and Father **how you put your faith into practice**, how your love made you work so hard, and how your hope in our Lord Jesus Christ is firm.
- James 2:14-18 (Good News Translation) ¹⁴My friends, what good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions do not prove it? Can that faith save you? ¹⁵Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. ¹⁶What good is there in your saying to them, “God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!” – if you don't give them the necessities of life? ¹⁷So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, “One person has faith, another has actions.” My answer is, “Show me how anyone can have faith without actions. I will show you my faith by my actions.”
- Matthew 14:13-21 (Good News Translation) ¹³When Jesus heard the news about John, he left there in a boat and went to a lonely place by himself. The people heard about it, and so they left their towns and followed him by land. ¹⁴Jesus got out of the boat, and when he saw the large crowd, his heart was filled with pity for them, and he healed their sick. ¹⁵That evening his disciples came to him and said, “It is already very late, and this is a lonely place. Send the people away and let them go to the villages to buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶“They don't have to leave,” answered Jesus. “You yourselves give them something to eat!” ¹⁷“All we have here are five loaves and two fish,” they replied. ¹⁸“Then bring them here to me,” Jesus said. ¹⁹He ordered the people to sit down on the grass; then he took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, and gave thanks to God. He broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰Everyone ate and had enough. Then the disciples took up twelve baskets full of what was left over. ²¹The number of men who ate was about five thousand, not counting the women and children.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Our faith grows stronger and becomes more effective as we put it into practice.

This church is a miracle. We take it for granted. It's been here as long as we can remember. It's here whenever we really need it. But this church is, in fact, a miracle.

I was reminded of that by a conversation I had at the reception following the memorial service for Bill Knoble. Gary Kuechle reminded me that his father had been a Charter Member of this church. When I met the elder Mr. Kuechle (who went by the nickname “Keek”) he probably was close to ninety years old. He had been a member at Lakewood Presbyterian Church until the mid-1950s. According to his son, one day Keek asked the simple question, “Why isn't there a Presbyterian church in Rocky River? There's one in Bay Village. There are three in Lakewood. Why not Rocky River?”

And from that simple question, a miracle occurred. God moved the hearts and hands of many people to invest a lot of time and labor to lay the groundwork for chartering a Presbyterian congregation in this town. People put their faith into action by devoting countless hours and sharing hard-earned treasures. They were motivated by a vision. They wanted to serve God through bringing together a fellowship of like-minded souls and raising up from the earth an edifice to serve as their spiritual home. Just as God created the heavens and the earth *ex nihilo* – that is, out of nothing – God worked through people as ordinary as you and me to create this fellowship of believers and this sanctuary of prayer and praise.

This church is a miracle.

But we might say that God is in the miracle business.

During this season of stewardship commitment I have used as our theme a phrase from the opening verses of 1 Thessalonians. That's where Paul gives thanks to God for believers who put their faith into practice.¹ The artwork that has appeared in this year's Stewardship Campaign materials and on the bulletin covers suggests a familiar story about putting one's faith into practice.

In Matthew's gospel the disciples are alone in a boat on the Sea of Galilee in the middle of the night. Suddenly they see what appears to be Jesus coming toward them. To their astonishment it looks like Jesus is actually walking to them across the water. When they call out to him in disbelief, Jesus confirms, "It is I." But Peter replies, "Lord, if it's really you, order me to come out on the water with you."² "Come," answers Jesus. The artwork depicts Peter putting his faith into practice as he straddles the boat's starboard gunwale and prepares to step out onto the water with Jesus.

I was studying that story as an example of the courageous act of putting your faith into practice. When you study Bible passages, it's often helpful to put the passage into context by reading what comes before and after the passage at hand. The passage *after* the walking-on-water story is simply a brief mention of Jesus healing some people who weren't Jewish. The passage that comes *before* the walking-on-water story is one of the stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes. Let's take a moment to recall that story.

Jesus had tried to go away by himself – a little "alone-time" to "recharge his batteries." But the crowds were so anxious to see him and hear him and be healed by him that they managed to find where Jesus had retreated to. Jesus couldn't help but feel compassion for the crowd, so he healed the sick among them. At one point the disciples tried to come to his aid. "Look how late it is," they told Jesus, "way past dinner time. And we're in the middle of nowhere. These people need to go where they can get themselves something to eat. Tell them you're done for the night and they should go home."

Jesus looked at his followers. "They don't have to go anywhere. You – you give them their food for tonight."

I imagine the disciples were thinking things like, "*Are you kidding? Do we look like caterers to you? We struggle to pack our own lunches! How are we supposed to feed – what, maybe 5,000 guys, plus women and kids?*" Something like that's probably what they were *thinking*.

What they *said*, according to Matthew's gospel, was, "All we have here are five loaves and two fish." To me that sounds like their way of declaring, "This is not our problem. There's nothing we can do about this. We don't *begin* to have what it would take to deal with this situation."

Jesus gave them the chance to put their faith into practice: "The fishes and those loaves – bring them to me," he told them. He thanked God for blessing them with food, broke up the fish and bread, and gave it all to the disciples to distribute. You know the rest: everyone was fed, with food to spare. Jesus enabled his disciples to experience putting their faith into practice. They put their faith into practice by sharing what was theirs for the good of the community.

God blesses us with the opportunity to put our faith into practice through this "miracle": this church, this fellowship, this community founded on faith. Our faith grows stronger and becomes more effective as we put it into practice. Each of us puts our faith into practice by

¹ 1 Thessalonians 1:3

² cf. Matthew 14:22-33 (Good News Translation)

sharing in supporting the work and outreach of this church. None of us does it all. We do it together. Neither you nor I is able on our own to

- pay to have the snow always plowed, and
- buy Sunday school curriculum, and
- support local and global Presbyterian mission, and
- pay for the water and gas and sewer and electricity, and
- underwrite the cost of live music in worship, and
- fund the expenses of our weekly youth fellowship groups, Adult education, Sunday school, Confirmation program, Vacation Bible School, youth mission trips and
- cover the cost of maintaining the computer network our office depends on, and
- pay salaries for the people whose work supports our church, and
- pick up the tab for maintaining the building and grounds...
- and... you can keep adding to that list.

None of us does it all by ourselves. We all do it together. The Letter of James laid it on the line to people in those earliest Christian communities. As we heard earlier, he wrote, "My friends, what good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions do not prove it? ...I will show you my faith by my actions."³

Like he had the disciples do in the midst of that hungry multitude, Jesus calls us to bring together what we have. With faith in God's constant, gracious and generous provision, we put our faith into practice. With an annual pledge and with weekly or monthly offerings we surrender a portion of what we often call "mine," we combine those gifts to make them "ours," and we offer our gifts to God joyfully and gratefully as our response to God's overwhelming love and care.

And *that* is how we put our faith into practice.

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³ James 2:14a, 18c Good News Translation