

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Life Together

James 5:13-20

James was writing to a Christian community that was growing weary of the challenge of faithful living. This passage is full of hints at the situation. The suffering James mentions refers back to his exhortation to be patient until the coming of the Lord. He points to the patience of the farmer who plants and then waits for the fruit to ripen for harvest. He talks about the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord, using them as an example of suffering and patience. “Behold,” he says, “we call those happy who were steadfast.” In short, together with James we sing the praises of all who remained faithful to God through the tough times.

But how do people remain faithful in challenging times? How do we persevere when it seems our perseverance is in vain? You and I have struggled to live faithfully only to realize that we’ve fallen short. What can sustain us in our faith pilgrimage? We’ve sought to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with the Lord. But we’ve seen injustice; and maybe we’ve noted our own complicity in it. So what good is working for justice if we know ourselves to have been unjust at times? We’ve experienced unkindness; and, at times we’ve responded with unkindness as well. So why bother being kind to each other, when others are unkind in return? And when it comes to walking humbly with God, well who can make such a claim? When we began our faith walk, when we caught fire for the Lord, we invested ourselves in the promised kingdom of God; but it seems to be a promise undone, indeed we’ve undone it ourselves. I tell you it’s easy to grow impatient, even too weary of faithful living in times like these. So how shall we remain faithful?

Very simply according to James our life together as a community of faith keeps us going. I realize, of course, that the Spirit of God is the source of that life together. James knew that as well. So it’s not actually our life together as a worshiping community that keeps us going; it’s the Spirit of God that empowers our life together and gives us strength for the difficult days. And yet, apart from that life together, we cannot remain truly faithful. Billy Graham’s daughter Anne Lotz was quoted recently, as saying “As long as you have a personal relationship with Jesus, church doesn’t really matter.” “Like so many other Christians,” she “had too many bad experiences in church to believe that God dwells there—and only there.” Yet at the end of the article, Ms. Lotz stated bluntly, “You can really love the Lord, but after a while, if you’re all by yourself, the fire goes cold.”¹ In short, we need each other to keep the fire burning. Life together in community is necessary for us to be faithful.

But some define community too narrowly. You’ll note that quote critiqued the idea that God dwelt only in church. No surprise there. Presbyterian and Reformed Christians never thought that God dwelt only in church. Indeed, we’ve always taught that the body of Christ was much too big, too inclusive to be identified with any one church or denomination. The Spirit of God is free and at work in the world bringing hope to the hopeless, food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, freedom to the oppressed. The task of the church is to find out where God’s spirit is at work and join in that work. Unfortunately, though, some prefer that we focus only on ourselves. They define community too narrowly.

To be involved where God’s spirit is involved means reaching out beyond the boundaries of our own sanctuary. It means touching the lives of other people. Tom Oliphant, editorial cartoonist for the Boston Globe, reportedly once asked Senator Ted Kennedy, “Where does this rabid concern about poverty come

¹ Lisa Miller, *A Graham Slam*, Newsweek, September 21, 2009, page 18

from?” Oliphant said Kennedy “looked at me like I was from Mars. And he said, ‘Have you never read the New Testament?’”² I would also mention the Old Testament. Both Testaments are quite clear on these matters. To be faithful means having a heart for those in need.

The wealthy have the means of providing for themselves. That is not a judgment against them. It is a statement of fact: they do not need our help. But the poor do not have the ear of the powerful. The poor do not have access to the best lawyers or the best health care or the best of anything. Thus God commands his people to advocate for the poor and to provide for them. That does not mean justice favors the poor over the rich. Justice is quite properly to be blind in that regard. But it does mean the people of God take sides. You heard me! The people of God take sides, making sure the poor have access to justice, making sure the poor have the ear of the powerful even though they can’t pay for it.

But in caring for the larger community we dare not forget ourselves and each other. We must also take our own pulse and the pulse of our community. Individual Christians may well be overwhelmed by the magnitude of their problems and become despairing. If that is the case, if any among us is suffering in that way, they are encouraged to pray. Pray for God’s spirit to renew your energy and motivation. Pray for the Spirit of God to bring about the transformation in each of us and in the whole world that God has promised in Christ. Pray for God to accomplish that heart transplant the prophet Ezekiel promised, that we might love God and love our neighbor, that we might faithfully serve our Lord. In focusing on the larger community, in ministering to the needs of others, we cannot overlook ourselves.

So if any are cheerful, if any can tell a success story, they should sing it out. Sing songs of praise to God for the victories won, be they small or large. Last Friday, Labor Secretary Hilda Solis announced that the Compass Group has joined with Yum Brands, McDonalds, Burger King, and others agreeing to pay an additional penny a pound to the tomato pickers. Thus, East Coast Growers and Packers, the third largest tomato grower in Florida, has resigned from the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange. They will be passing along a penny a pound to their pickers. Hearing that news, members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers are rejoicing even though none of that money is going to them. It’s not about them, you see. It’s about justice. It’s about the Spirit of God changing the way people do business with the tomato pickers, and every small step forward encourages them to continuing working for change.

We live in interesting and troubled times. They can’t help but impact our lives and the way we live. Do any of us despair of seeing that kingdom Jesus promised? If so, we are called to prayer for ourselves and for each other. Begin by confessing just how invested we are in the status quo, and just how much we fear the changes that must take place in us and in others for that kingdom to take its rightful place. And if you know of some who have fallen away, who have given up on the church either because they felt the church let them down or because they just couldn’t deal with the faith challenge any more, then bring them back. Share the good news you have heard. Talk about the changes in yourselves, the answers to your own prayers. You will save them from the hopelessness into which they have fallen.

We need each other. We need to lift each other in prayer. We need to encourage each other in hope. We need to study the Scriptures together, to confess our sin to each other, and to forgive each other. Faithful people are healed and strengthened by their life together. But the good news is not about us. It’s about the movement of God’s spirit and the expansion of God’s kingdom. In life and in death we belong to God, our confession boldly announces. In life and in death our Lord raises us up to new life, forgiving our sins and setting us right with God and with each other. Let us celebrate the work of God’s spirit among us and around us, that we may continue being the faithful people of God.

² Tom Oliphant, NewsHour on PBS, August 26, 2009, as quoted in *The Christian Century*, September 22, 2009, page 9.