

## *A Way to Serve*

James 2:14-18

April 30, 2023

If you were to ask me to describe the core, the heart, of Christian theology, this is what I would say: our faith is rooted in the story of a transcendent and relational God who comes close to humankind, who becomes Emmanuel, God with us in Jesus Christ, incarnate, living among us. As the eminent theologian Willie Jennings has written, ours is “the story of a people created by God and called to God’s self.” In Jesus Christ, God entered our lives in a way that has radically transformed us. We are shaped by his story. At least, we ought to be.

Like the Old Testament Prophets in whose tradition it stands, the letter of James confronts us with the sinful distance between God’s call and our response, the gap between our words and our work. Earlier, in the second chapter, his example hits close to home. James critiques the way members of the church welcome wealthy guests with great formality and give them the best seats in the sanctuary, while the poor are disregarded and made to stand in the back. Their pious posturing creates a kind of spiritual self-importance, a belief that belonging to a Christian community is a badge of honor to be worn rather than a call to serve to be lived.

James has no patience for elegant performances, elaborate propositions, or eloquent proclamations that do not serve the needs of neighbors. His point here is utterly unambiguous. We can understand and believe all the intricacies and technicalities of Christian theology. We can have all the warm feelings and deep convictions. We can memorize and quote chapter and verse of scripture and shelter ourselves in the smug satisfaction that we are God’s favorite children. But unless our faith leads to action, we are condemned by the very Gospel we preach.

Faith without works is dead. A church with no mission is doomed.

And so, I am grateful to be part of a congregation of disciples who are so passionate about finding a variety of ways to serve. You know that the clearest demonstration of what we believe is the way we live. And so, in your own life as disciples of Jesus Christ, you reach out with acts of extreme generosity, compassion, and kindness. And I, your pastor, am a witness to these actions on a daily basis. I see and hear and know how faithful you are.

But I also know that not far from here, there are neighbors who lack even the most basic necessities for sustainable or flourishing life, and we have been called to serve.

I also know that right here among us, there are those who have given up hope that anyone will notice them today, and we have been called to care.

I also know that not far from us, there are those who live in constant fear of violence, and we have been called to act.

I also know that not far from us, there are those who are systematically left behind and shut out, and we have been called to speak up.

I also know that not far from us, there are those whose power can be better used for the common good, and we have been called to confront.

I also know that not far from us, there are those whose lives lack deep purpose even as they are surrounded by many things, and we have been called to bear witness.

Yes, not far from us, there are those who need what we have to give, and those who have what we need to receive. And we, the body of Jesus Christ alive in the world, have an unmistakable, inescapable, undeniable call to put our faith in action, to embody the transformation that the story of Jesus makes possible.

And hear this, Second Church: that transformation begins right here, in this sacred, beautiful space. Why? Because our worship is the source of our service. Consider this: faith without works is dead, but works without faith are fleeting and short-lived. We must be grounded in the story of salvation that makes our service sustainable and sturdy.

Jesus described his purpose this way: the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. And so it is with those who follow him. When all is said and done, this is why we were given the gift of life in the first place—to offer it back in service to others. Last Sunday, you might remember, we anchored ourselves in the act of listening well to the voices and stories of others. Today, we are charged to serve. And both of these essential acts—listening well and serving—require humility, compassion, and relationship.

A couple of years ago, Bryan Stevenson spoke for the Faith in Action forum hosted at Butler University. Several of us had the opportunity to go and hear him. Stevenson founded and leads the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. In his book *Just Mercy*, he describes growing up poor in a racially segregated community in Delaware. The seminal moment, the turning point in his life, came when his grandmother sat him down and said, “You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close.”

You have to get close. He calls it the *power of proximity*. It changes us.

Last week, I voiced my concern about the destructive and corrosive impact of contempt. One of contempt’s particularly pernicious powers is how it distances us from each other—how contempt

for those around us gives us a pass to ignore their suffering, or even to blame the suffering when their needs make us uncomfortable or uneasy.

Proximity renders contempt indefensible. Put another way, you cannot dismiss or despise any person whose voice you have heard and whose life you have witnessed firsthand. Getting close changes the way we read statistics and listen to stories. Proximity renders contempt indefensible.

A brief testimony. On Maundy Thursday, I found myself in desperate need of a haircut. It was last-minute and spring break week, and so I did a quick, frantic search for barbers in the area. After a couple of failed attempts, I found a salon that is part of a large national chain (with over \$1 billion in revenue in 2019). When I walked in, I was warmly greeted and immediately taken to my chair. And as the stylist began, she placed her hands on my shoulders, and she said, “You are stressed.”

“Why so tense?” she asked. I patiently explained that I was a pastor, and it was a busy week. The barber responded, “You’re a pastor. Well, that’s a blessing. Now, relax. For just a few minutes, let your worries go.” I looked at my watch. I did not have a few minutes. But there I was, stuck in that chair. So, I took a deep breath, and then I noticed that there was a picture on her mirror in front of us. Two young boys playing outside. They appeared to be about the ages of my own sons, and so I asked her about them. We talked about our children. We laughed together about the precocious things they say and do. And when the haircut was over and she was walking me to the counter to pay, she asked me where that church I pastored was. When I told her, tears appeared in her eyes. She said, “From my boys and me, I want to thank you for having a food pantry. Your church has been there for my family when we needed help. Nobody over there judged us. Thank you, Pastor.” I stumbled out of the salon, barely making it to my car before breaking down.

Now, like you, I know the statistics about the working hungry—those who work full time jobs and still cannot afford food for their families and

stable housing. I had read all the stories. I had seen the documentary. And like many of you, I could diagnosis the problem from a distance that enabled my disinterest. But that day, I was standing face-to-face with a human being whose life was now connected to my life. I know her name, the names and ages of her sons. Coming close changes us. Proximity renders contempt indefensible.

Or, listen to James: words without actions lack all life. They're dead. When you know someone, it changes the way you think about them. When the violence in the headlines touches your family, your school, your neighborhood, it changes the way you think about what ought to be done to stop it. When you see faces and hear voices, you cannot be still and you will not be silent.

And now, research is finding what James knew intuitively—that this proximity has the capacity to lift those in need. I heard it again this week from a social worker at a local elementary school when I asked her about what separated those who found a way out of poverty from those who could not. Her answer was: connections, relationships. Proximity renders contempt indefensible.

So, in the months ahead, we at Second are going to be diving more deeply into the kinds of relationships that might offer mutual transformation, if only we trust each other enough to be vulnerable. We are going to welcome firsthand the power of proximity, listening to neighbors whose lives may feel distant from our own, and we are going to find that this distance is a myth—a lie.

What we will find instead is that our fulfillment is entirely bound to the flourishing of our neighbors. We will find that all of us are harmed when any of us suffers. We will find that our deepest purpose can only be discovered when we invest our lives in what matters most, discovering the truth of Jesus' words: that those who give their lives away in service to others will find a more lasting joy than all who live small lives of self-interest and preservation.

We are a people formed by the story of a transcendent God who chose proximity over power. And we can do the same.

Actually, that's not quite right. We **must** do the same, for so much depends on this. Amen.