

"DOERS OF THE WORD"
September 8 1991

TEXT: James 2:17 "So faith by itself; if it has no works, is dead."

Some years ago, when I was living in Kansas, a friend of mine asked me to go with him to Wichita, about sixty miles away. The doctors thought he had narcolepsy, a condition which made him fall asleep from time to time, no matter what he was doing and with little or no warning. And they wanted him to go to a hospital in Wichita for some tests.

Naturally, I did not want him to drive that far alone --not if he might go to sleep at any moment. So I agreed to go with him. I assumed, of course, that he wanted me to do the driving. You can well imagine my concern, however, when he pulled up in front of my house, reached across the front seat, and opened the passenger-side door. I must admit that my Christian charity was stretched almost to the breaking point as I got in the car, and we drove off with him at the wheel.

As we drove along it soon became apparent that my friend wanted to talk, and that was just fine with me. Anything to keep him awake. And, as we talked, it became equally apparent that my friend, a very conservative Roman Catholic, had what might be called a "Certified Public Accountant's Approach" toward sin. In his view, every sin, no matter how small, meant so many added days in Purgatory, while every good deed meant so many days less. And he said with great relish that he hoped my going with him to Wichita would take some time off my own sentence.

I told him I appreciated that, but that we Protestants believed we are already saved by God's grace, that we did not need to "earn" salvation by our good works. With a look of total incomprehension he turned to me and asked, "Then why are you going to Wichita with me?" He was interested, but quite incredulous, when I replied that, even though we are already saved through faith, we believe in doing good to others as a way of showing our gratitude for God's grace.

It seems to me, that is what Jesus was saying in this morning's scripture. It is important to have faith, to believe that God loves us and forgives us. But faith by itself is not enough. "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

Faith alone, for instance, is not enough when it comes to helping others. Somewhere or other I read this parody of our Lord's parable of the sheep and the goats.

"I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger.
I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release.
I was naked and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health.
I was homeless and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.
I was lonely and you left me alone to pray for me.
You seem so close to God; but I am still very hungry, and lonely, and cold."

As we read in our Unison Reading this morning: "If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself; if it has no works, is dead."

Faith is important. But it is not much good to those in need unless we put Christ's teachings into practice. And God seems to have arranged things so that, unless we put it into practice, our faith does not help us much either.

Jesus said, "Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it." (Matthew 7:24-27)

Like many of you, I believe that our worship together on Sunday mornings is the keystone of our faith. I completely agree with Theodore Roosevelt who said, "I know that we can worship God out under the sky just as well as we can in church. But I also know that we rarely do so." There is something about these hallowed surroundings, about the presence of the other worshipers, about the prayers and the music which nourish our spirits as nothing else can. That is why I am constantly urging you to come to church whenever possible and why I am disappointed and discouraged when our attendance is less than it should be. We need the experience of corporate worship. It is essential to our faith.

But what we do together in worship is only part of the

story. In a few minutes, the Packers will be playing the Detroit Lions not far from here at County Stadium. And, except for times when they are trying to confuse the other team, they will huddle up after each play to get instructions and to increase their solidarity. Having played the game, myself, I can testify from personal experience to the importance of that huddle.

But the game is not played in the huddle. And, after a few seconds, the players break out of the huddle and line up on the line of scrimmage. The best preseason training, the best scouting reports, the best game plan in the world do not mean a thing unless they are followed up on that line of scrimmage. That is what the game is all about.

And the same is true of the church. All of the sermon preparation, all the Christian teaching, all the hymns, and prayers, and anthems, do not mean a thing unless we eventually break from the huddle and go out into the world which is our line of scrimmage. Christianity is about love --love for God and love for our fellow human beings. And love, if it is really love, is not just something you talk about; it is something you do.

Some of it we do together through the corporate work of this church and of our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. Through them we help orphanages in Italy and the Philippines, medical clinics in India and Honduras, schools and colleges in this country and around the world, the Tosa Food Bank, the Milwaukee Hearing Society, the St. Vincent DePaul meal program, Laubach Literacy, Habitat for Humanity, and many other ways in which we touch the lives of needy people.

And some of it we do on our own. Perhaps we volunteer to help the elderly through Mayfair Interfaith or the Congregational Home. Perhaps we give of our time to the Salvation Army, or Goodwill, or the Boy Scouts, or the Cancer Society. Perhaps we help teach people to read or serve as volunteers at a local hospital. Perhaps we give of ourselves in some other way. But we give of ourselves in one way or another.

Why? Because "faith by itself; if it has no works, is dead." Because we are followers of One who characterized his own ministry by saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19)

We do it because we believe in Him who said, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." (Matthew 25:35-36)

And when they asked Him, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we

see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee?
And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" he
replied, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least
of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

In the words of St. Paul, then, let us "be doers of the
word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22)