

## Pray and Move Your Feet

James 5:13-18

May 7, 2023

Spiritual depth fuels courageous faith. Genuine prayer compels just action.

When I was an undergraduate student considering a call to ministry, I heard Peter Storey preach the baccalaureate sermon for the graduating class of Duke Divinity School. Dr. Storey, former United Methodist Bishop in South Africa, was a consequential leader in the faith-based opposition to the apartheid system, first as pastor in Cape Town and then as chaplain to Nelson Mandela and other prisoners on Robben Island. Storey risked his life to defend and preach the Gospel's message of a God who shows no partiality. As long as I live, I will never forget the piercing call that closed the sermon to these soon-to-be pastors. Bishop Storey said this: "Until you lead your congregation to engage with the real world, your pastoring will be mere pampering—your proclamation a religious version of talking to yourself. You must resist with all your might the temptation to play 'church' while the world bleeds."

The last two Sundays, we've heard how the Letter of James directly confronts this lifeless approach to Christian living, self-righteously satisfied with spiritual ceremony. We've heard how James shouts across the centuries. *It is not enough!* Like Amos, his prophetic muse, Brother James will not let us get away with pretending, pampering, posturing, playing "church." So, for four and a half chapters, he condemns worship without work, belief that fails to change behaviors.

And then, at the close of the letter, James turns to the topic of prayer. It might seem like an incongruous interruption to end on a spiritual

subject after concentrating the majority of his content on the concrete. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that the fifth chapter of James is a later addition to the letter, added by editors. Others simply suppose that James was trying for a soft landing after such a hard-hitting letter. A gentle, pastoral closing. I disagree. I've known preachers like James. They always save some thunder for the final flurry. And I am convinced that is precisely what James does here. His message has not changed. Genuine faith compels just action. Spiritual depth fuels courageous faith. We cannot divide our devotion from our discipleship.

Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, professor of youth, church, and culture at Princeton Seminary, has done remarkable in-depth research on the kind of faith that many congregations are teaching their youth. She has not been impressed. Dean labels the message *moralistic therapeutic deism*. Some key features: The highest objective is to feel good about ourselves. God's chief role is to resolve all of our problems on our terms and our schedule. Prayer is conceived as a credit card swipe on the divine vending machine. Prayers go up; answers come down. It is a theology that asks or demands almost nothing of us. An invitation to play "church." And we see it across the landscape of American Christianity, from the sanctimonious hypocrisy to narcissistic spirituality to the alarming rise of Christian nationalism. And we should call them what they are—these are idolatries parading as piety. They lack any trace of transcendent truth.

And so, it should not be surprising that these messages are closely correlated with a precipitous decrease in faith commitment among emerging

generations. And we, driven by fear, have responded to this deafening cacophony with timid whispers, with subtle self-restraint.

It is time to shift course. In the context of divisive diatribes that only aim to feed our egos, the message of the Church must be this: Following Jesus Christ will change your life. Being a disciple will push you beyond your comfort zone. Belonging to a church will transform you. Yes, I think church membership should come with a word of caution, a warning sign. If you choose to pray, prepare yourself to be confronted with the call to act. Warning! If you commit your life to Jesus, you will be changed. Spiritual depth fuels courageous faith.

Which brings me to our confirmands. It would be easy, I think, to mistake this morning's service for something like a commencement ceremony or an honor society induction. The liturgy and the choreography will seem safe, formal, ancient. But please do not be fooled. What is happening here today is the most important work in the world because the words we speak, the promises you make, matter. When God's people pray, things happen. We put ourselves before God in all of our vulnerability, with a mix of faith and doubt, and we say, "Here I am." And we pray, "God, use me." Warning! When you speak those words, brace yourself for what is to come.

In my experience, the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective because those prayers compel the kind of action that is a living response to the words spoken. The African proverb puts it this way: "When you pray, move your feet." When we really pray, we will not be content to play "church" in a bleeding world because our prayers will push us into those places where our words meet action. And this kind of faithful living will provide a compelling witness to a watching world. A witness that begins right here.

One of the most extraordinary gifts that we unwrap every single time we gather at Second Presbyterian Church is the presence of every generation currently

alive under the same roof. Right now, in this space, we have infants in their parents' arms alongside nearly empty nesters. We have high school seniors and more seasoned seniors well into their tenth decade. This morning, Gen Z shares the pew with the greatest generation. It is truly remarkable if you consider for a moment: Where else in your life does this take place? I'm willing to wager it's rare in this culture so carved up by age and stage of life.

The question is how we make faithful use of a community where all generations gather to pray. I think we listen. I think we build relationships across divides. And so, over the last few weeks, I've listened to our confirmands and our high school seniors preparing for their Footsteps of Faith journey. I've read their faith statements, and as I listen to their stories and read their statements of faith, one thing stands out. They desire a faith, and a church, that walks the talk, that practices what it preaches. They have no interest in playing "church" or becoming moralistic therapeutic deists. They have no interest in cowering in sectarian silos that reflect the polarization of the culture. They want to be *challenged* by you. They want to follow Jesus.

I have heard their voices. And, as I have, I have also reflected on the generations that speak to precisely that longing. The witness of those who have prayed and then put their lives into God's hands, who have moved their feet into places of danger. And we need to remember that kind of courage that is a gift of the Spirit given to all those who pray for it. We need to tell the stories of that courageous faith to our children and our youth whose convictions are being shaped here. We need to tell those stories, and the good news is we don't have to go far to find them.

Two years ago, Rev. Dr. Ray Bowden died at the age of ninety-five years and six months. Ray joined the staff of Second Church in 1985 for what he described as a brief, final chapter in ordained ministry. That brief, final chapter lasted thirty-five years here. Anyone who encountered Ray Bowden knew him to be deeply spiritual. He was even pious. Ray was also a pastor who refused to play "church"

while God's people were suffering. In April of 1968, after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Ray organized a memorial service and then a communal meal in the basement of his Kansas City church. He did something he should not have done—no white Presbyterian clergyman should have done—in April of 1968. He invited the grieving, reeling Black teenagers who lived in the neighborhood and offered them, in that church basement, a safe space to process the mix of anger and sadness that they were feeling.

In 1968 this was an act of courageous faith, and it came with significant risk. Word got out. For several weeks Ray received threatening phone calls at home and in his office. One evening, after large rocks were thrown through the windows of his home while his children were there, he decided to take the rest of the family out of town to keep them safe. When he returned, he found a cross that had been burned on his front lawn. It was Good Friday. So, Ray went to church. He heard the words of scripture, the cries of the crowd. *Crucify him*. The judgment of self-righteous religious leaders, and the words of Jesus from the cross. *Forgive them*. Ray prayed all the way home, and reflecting later on the experience, he wrote, "I felt as never before the assurance that Christ alone can give when one is receiving threats and hearing angry, unjust, undeserved words." His courage renewed, Ray continued the work of prophetic preaching and action for decades to come.

Now, it is tempting to think of this story as extraordinary. And, in a way, it is. But at a deeper level, Ray's witness illustrates what can be true for you and for all of us. It's the kind of message that has the power to renew the Church. Stop playing. The world is broken. People are hurting. Spiritual depth compels courageous faith. Right now, in your life, there are opportunities to embrace the work our worship demands. It must begin in prayer, and it must not end there.

Because when we pray, we will not be afraid to put our faith in action.

When we pray, God will change us.

When we pray, God will give us courage.

When we pray, God will guide our steps.

Second Church, it's time to move our feet.

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.