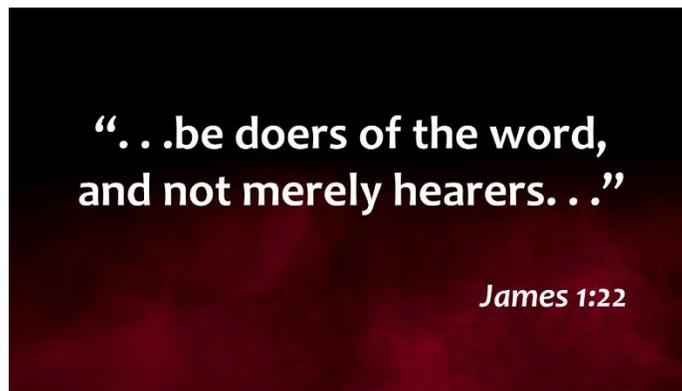


January 8, 2023
James 1:22-25
Fire Keepers
Michael Stanfield

²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. The grass withers and the flowers fade but your word, O God, stands forever. So, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of hearts on that word be acceptable in your sight. Amen*

“ . . . be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. . . .”



This *is* the central message of James. For the book of James is, if anything, practical. By the time we get to James, we are now into our third generation of Christians. The church has begun to be established. There are those now who are a part of the church who grew up in the church. Unlike their grandparents who felt the zealous Call of Christ against a Pagan orientation and lifestyle, these third and fourth generation Christians were socialized knowing the Christian faith from birth. They understood that their ultimate worth was not in what they did or did not do. They understood that their worth was summed up in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice of love for them on the cross.

In this way, these third and fourth generation Christians were children of privilege. And as will happen, children who grow up reaping the benefits of such sacrifices usually end up taking such benefits for granted. It's human nature. And so, these first century second and third generation Christians, who had grown up in the church, were now in danger of doing exactly what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, on the cusp of a World War, would warn all Twentieth Century people of privilege against as well – Cheapening this precious gift of grace: Doing little to show gratitude for what Christ (and following in *his* footsteps) their parents and grandparents had done for *them*: doing little to demonstrate how that faith had truly changed their lives –



Today we reap the rich benefits of the sacrifices of the saints who, 65 years ago, were a part of the generation that came way out here in the country to build a simple multipurpose building from which to be a mission church of Jesus Christ. Then that next generation built on the first.



Because of the way *they* responded faithfully to Christ's calling in their time, we know today that *we* are part of a spiritual home for whom mission matters *and* that we know will always accept us no matter what.

Because of the way *they* responded faithfully to Christ's calling in their time, we know today that *we* are members of a family of compassionate doers.



From the very beginning, hands on mission that grew out of an understanding that social justice was at the center of the gospel, was part and parcel of who Trinity was.



But that “walk the walk” compassion that is a part of Trinity’s DNA must be passed on or it is ever only a generation away from dying. That’s why James comes along on a day like today to remind us that we should not take the faith that is ours (because of what God has done through Christ at Trinity in the past) for granted, nor the future of this church as a given.



Not that there is any sign at the moment that either of these are in great jeopardy. We have, in fact, just come from one of the busiest, most active falls in the life of a church that I can remember. And it looks as though we are poised for a year of hope-filled growth as you all have

increased your monetary giving to the church – to the tune of about 5% when most churches everywhere big and small are struggling financially. We will therefore be able to fully fund all of our mission initiatives, so that we are poised to dream and to expand. So, first and foremost, I want to extend a word of thanks to the fine leadership of all of our active elders and to you, the members, for your generosity of spirit in every aspect of your lives.

You need to know that what you *do* matters. People everywhere are being blessed because of *your* faithfulness. But the message of James is that the Holy Spirit does not want us to rest until those less privileged have the same opportunity to experience the same gifts of grace through faith in Christ that we have – to be a part of a true family – a family of deepened kinship and acceptance – a family where we can truly be supported and loved.

And the practical reality is that this family, this community takes work to maintain. There is always much to be done to keep it alive and well and reaching out – to keep its DNA passing on to the next generation. And that means that we constantly are in need of new leaders. When the same few try to do it all, two things happen: 1. Those few get burned out and 2. The rest are deprived of the privilege of serving in this special way. As Paul reminded us in his first letter to the Corinthians, we need every part of the body functioning in order truly to be faithful in our mission to the world.

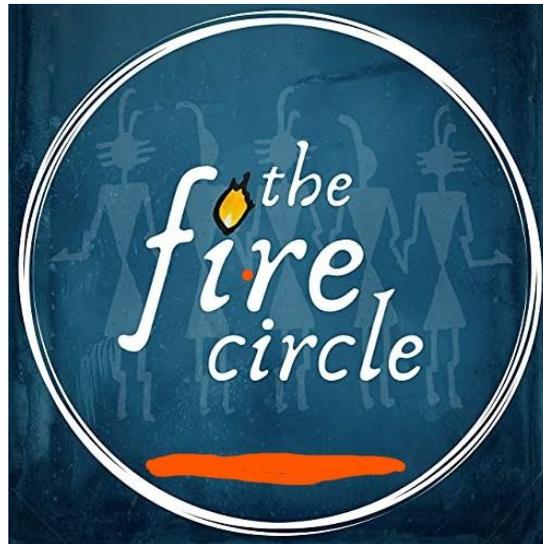
All of us – not just those called into leadership – need to be reminded from time to time of our privilege that is also our responsibility as Christians. And that is what James does:

A dark red rectangular box with white text. The text reads: ". . .be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. . ."

James 1:22

As most of you know by now, I grew up in the United Methodist church. I received excellent early instruction in discipleship from a Methodist pastor named Bill Andrews. And I continued to have a relationship with Bill even after I became a Presbyterian. In fact, he was present at my ordination as a Presbyterian Minister. Early on in my ministry, he shared a bit of wisdom that I have never forgotten.

He told me that the church was a lot like a group of people coming in out of the cold in the middle of winter gathered in fellowship around a great fire.



“The folks making up the community of faith,” he said, “are all gathered in basically 3 concentric circles around the fire:



An inner circle



An intermediate circle



And an outer circle



First is the outer circle. It is made up of folks who sit closest to the door.



Those who do this do so for varying reasons:

- a. They may be suffering from illness or the decline that reaches all of us sooner or later – the ravages of old age.
- b. Or they may be strangers who have simply come in just to get warm for a little while and therefore may want to be inconspicuous so they can make a quick exit if they find the folks there unfriendly and they don't like it inside.
- c. Or they have no intention of getting closer to the fire. They come to be inspired to be Christians in their own way and live out of the fellowship and the worship that is that one hour of the week.

- d. Or they may have come in because they have heard of the warmth of the place and they would really like very much to be invited to come closer to the fire.
- e. Or they may actually be people who *were* once closer to the inner circle of the fire. But for whatever reason, disillusionment, hurt, conflict over how the fire ought to be kept, they have drifted away from that inner circle and are thinking about heading out the door.

Many of the people on this outer circle may have little knowledge of what it really takes and has taken over the years to keep the fire going.

But then there is the intermediate circle.



The intermediate circle is a little closer to the fire. These folks realize that the fire will not continue to burn without some fuel. And they also know that the fuel doesn't get on the fire all by itself.

And so they help out with the fire from time to time. This may be because they are not on the church board and therefore don't feel as much is required of them; or it may be because they don't believe they *belong* in the inner circle – don't have the gifts to be *in* the inner circle; *Or* it could be that they just can't take on one more heavy commitment in their lives right now.

These folks are vital to the workings of the church and can sometimes be as involved as those in the inner circle but usually are not. They will get up from time to time to throw a log on the fire. They may even sharpen a saw or donate some oil for the saw now and then. Mostly they are in a supportive role which is great since nothing happens for long without support.

Finally, there is the inner circle.



These are the keepers of the fire. They are heavily invested and involved in keeping the fire going. They learn as much as possible about what it takes to keep it going and to keep the fellowship around it growing.

And it is unbelievable all of the details involved in keeping the fire.

There's finding the right trees that have the right wood

There's planning ahead to make sure that you always have seasoned wood along with your green.

Then there is the making sure that one has all the proper tools –

- The chainsaws
- The hand saws
- The axes
- The sledgehammers
- The wedges
- Trucks to haul everything

Then there is care and up keep of the tools

- sharpening
- and oiling
- and cleaning

Then there is the actual work

- finding the trees
- traveling to and from the trees
- sawing, splitting and hauling the wood
- not to mention the hour by hour work of keeping the fire going and recruiting or hiring the right people for certain jobs that are part of tending that fire.

These inner circle folks are those that by far do most of the work. But guess what? They are also the closest to the fire at the center of the community and are therefore the warmest. They have the greatest appreciation for the fire and its importance in the lives of all who come there.

“Outer circle, intermediate circle, and inner circle. These,” said Bill, “are what make up a congregation. The fire is the burning blessing of being close to the Word of God and doing ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. And it is a blessing. It is the pastor’s job to help train people and by God’s Word to convince people that this is the most joyous wonderful privilege in the world.”

Wise advice from a seasoned pastor that I have never forgotten.

There are of course other ways to be warmed that I now acknowledge that my old school pastor probably never considered. For instance, there are *some* these days who are able to see Christ shining through everything that is alive. They may not use that language but it is what they see and experience. They do not see the institutional church as necessary to living a faithful life. Yet they live out of the love of Christ.

Personally, I would find it hard, if not impossible to practice my faith without a community. But I think we insiders need to be big enough to realize that living out the love of Christ is the most important thing – no matter how it's done. So, we should refuse to judge.

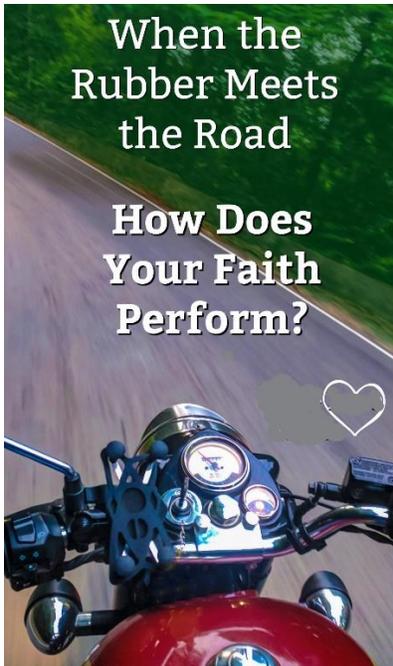
Both John Calvin and CS Lewis were quite aware of what is known as the difference between the Visible Church and the Invisible Church.



The Visible Church is the messy fallible institution we know only too well; the Invisible Church is the true spiritual church whose roots are archetypal and therefore carry a bit of the uncanny. The overlapping portion of a Venn diagram, where the institutional church and the invisible church meet, make up the truly faithful, incarnational church here on earth. This means that some who claim to be part of the true church are not and some who don't actually are.

As such the Visible Church is not perfect by any means but is the best crucible I know for practicing the love of neighbor that Jesus called us to do – so that loving all people everywhere becomes second nature.

One can certainly come to love God and to faithful living without the church, but it is certainly a means of God's Grace like no other because it *is* incarnational – it combines the earthly and the heavenly, the practical with the impractical, the messiness of being human with the glory of living in God's image.



And in the church, one place where the rubber of faith meets the road of practical living is being a part of that inner circle. In the Presbyterian Church we officially call these inner circle folks of a congregation who also have gifts for leadership, “elders.” But in a small congregation like ours, access to that circle is much easier to come by whether one is an elder or not.



I have found here that lots of people who are not elders are still willing to remain as close to the fire as ever. They see fire tending as not only a responsibility of elders but of every disciple of Jesus Christ. However, our make-up as Presbyterians places a huge added responsibility upon those called to be active elders. At a minimum, an elder will provide leadership for two committees of session in addition to attending monthly meetings. Elders also try to make room in their lives to be present for all important events in the life of the church – including worship. And so, today, if they were not already a part of that inner circle (as I know some of them were), our new elders will step forward and take their place closer to the fire.

As we ordain and install today, there may be those of you who are on the edge or in that intermediate circle who would really like to come in a little closer to the fire. If you are one of

those, the best way is to make your desire known is through participation in existing activities and committee work. Make your yen to participate known and you will not be sitting on the sidelines for long – I guarantee it!

God has great things in store for this church. So, if you are able, why not find a way to become more intimately connected to the inner circle – to hear or respond to the calling to be tenders of God’s ministry fire?

Which circle do you currently belong to? And of which circle do you feel called this day to be a part? Let us pray.

Dear Lord, give us the power of your Holy Spirit that we may be doers of your word and not hearers only. Amen



You are invited now to contemplate your recommitment to God by considering the dedication of your tithes and gifts and abilities. Your tithes and gifts may be given by leaving an offering in the plate on the table just outside the back of the sanctuary or by mailing a check to the office made out to the church or by going to our church’s web site, finding the Give button and following the prompts. As you contemplate these things, let us pray:

And now Oh Lord, as we reflect on how we might be called to be more committed, lead us to a time of recommitment in this service of worship as we return a portion of what you have given us back to you. Bless these gifts that they may further your will and way in the world, amen.