

## ***Begin with silence***

Did you notice anything especially provocative in today's readings?

- A statement that would set brother against brother and become a rallying cry for civil wars?
- Hard to believe, isn't it, but unfortunately true
- In the religious struggles which spread across Europe in the 1500's, quotations from the Letter of James became a theological caricature of the medieval Roman church: "Can faith save you? ...Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (*James 2: 17*)

That passage in James is clearly a response to the great rallying cry of Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers: justification by faith

- Their theology of salvation had its foundation in Paul's Letter to the Romans: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ...effective through faith." (*Rom 3:23*)
- Paul goes on to say, "We hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law." (*Rom 3:28*)
- In other words, there's nothing we can do—no matter how noble or holy—that will earn our salvation
- That was a big issue in those days, in ways we can hardly imagine

For example, take our spiritual ancestor Henry VIII, who despite his struggles with the Pope was firmly rooted in medieval theology

- As the end of his life approached, Henry began to wonder about his eternal fate
- I guess executing a few of your wives can have that effect on a man
- In his will Henry donated huge sums to monasteries on the condition that they continuously celebrate memorial masses on his behalf
- The idea was that if he found himself in purgatory (or worse), his torment would be eased during the time a mass was being said in his name

It's not hard to see the spiritual bankruptcy of "works" like that, and in recent decades the Roman Catholic church has agreed with Lutherans that salvation is purely a gift of God's grace, embraced through our faith

- Unfortunately, a by-product of the bitter debates and bloody quarrels of the Reformation is that today's passage from the Letter of James has been quietly put on the shelf by most Christians
- A careful reading shows its deep concern with Jesus' central commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself," and it asks how faith in the abstract can fulfill that mandate
- Paul knew that when we recognize the gift of God's grace in our lives, we cannot help but respond
- In his Letter to the Galatians he said, "the only thing that counts is faith working through love." (*Gal 5:6*)

It seems to me that the central theological question is not whether believing in Jesus or serving others is more important, but how these two aspects of faith grow together in our hearts and lives

- One of the gifts of being part of this church family is that both faith and ministry are nurtured and supported
- We are blessed by having so many amazing people in our midst, examples of faithfulness and service to others
- Today I have permission to share with you three stories of how offering our time and talents in ministry can make a difference in peoples' lives and nurture our own faith

The first comes from **Jim Pike**, whose son Carson will be baptized in just a few minutes (*at the 9:30 service*)

- It was his brother Geoff who opened the door for Jim and brought him into the church
- Back at our Hickory Street location, Geoff started teaching Jr. High SS, but quickly found how challenging it was
- The kids were "pretty high energy," and he decided that a group of men would be perfect leaders
- Geoff's kids were young then, as were Jeff Rudolph's, another partner in that team—Jim was in early his 20's, not yet married—he was the "young guy" of the group

The three men found they had gifts to give to the kids: spending precious time and building relationships with them

- Jim taught for two years before moving away soon after marrying Steph—now he's been back at St. Tim's and teaching for seven more years

- After his brother's untimely death, Jim and Jeff Rudolph mutually promised they'd keep teaching until their kids were past Jr. High age—birth of Carson has really raised the stakes on that one!
- Both Jim and Jeff are not only devoted fathers but have challenging jobs which often take them away from home—their Sunday School ministries represent very generous offerings of their gifts and time

Jim likes this ministry because he sees it as the first age when young people are ready for in-depth discussions of faith questions

- Clearly the kids like it too—the room is packed every week and our acolytes always want to go downstairs as soon as they can (probably it's not just for the donuts)
- While other Youth Group discussions tend to be issue-oriented, Jim prefers to stay with the Scriptures assigned for the week's worship
- It's always his hope that this will result in “car-talk” on the way home, since all ages have been working on the same passages
- He knows it means a lot to the youth to have caring relationships with men outside their families, and he loves watching them grow up—many of his former students are in college now

Even so, Jim is convinced he gets more from these conversations than the kids do

- For one thing, it forces him to read the Scriptures and prepare before church
- The youth see things from a different perspective and he always gets new insights from them
- He's had to learn how to be comfortable responding to hard questions, often asking if anyone else in the class has an idea
- Sometimes it's OK for adults not to have the answer, but to leave everyone pondering the question
- Jim's been teaching Sunday School for a long time, but it still energizes him and touches his heart

**Phyllis Rice** has taken part in a lot of ministries over the decades at St. Timothy's

- She sang in the choir for years, was a Sunday School teacher, and served as President of the ECW
- She was involved in the Cursillo and ACR spiritual renewal programs

- Phyllis visited the sick in hospitals, became a Stephen Minister, and led sing-alongs at Cherelbyn Nursing Home
- She still continues as a reader at the 7:45 service and loves to read to kids at the House of Hope
- And get this: Phyllis started the Ministry Fair back on Hickory Street in the '90's, and she continued as co-chair until last year

These days the focus of her ministry is the Transmitters Prayer Group, which meets on Tuesday afternoons

- She loves praying with those people: “in my old age I can do that—there are no physical limitations to praying”
- She told me, “At our different stages of life we can always find a way to serve the Lord—my last stage is prayer.”
- Phyllis remembers one Ministry Fair when the Transmitters borrowed an antique phone from Fr. Warner and put it on their table—then they created a cloud out of cotton and set it “floating” above them, with a wire running from the phone to the cloud
- I guess you'd say that Phyllis is really connected with God

She sees the effects of prayer on people—it means a lot to them to know they're being prayed for

- And she can tell how happy and relieved they are when things work out the way they hope—“even if they don't remember to say thank you, I can see it in their faces.”
- Her prayer ministry is an expression of caring for other people—as a follower of Jesus she's “supposed to help” in any way she can
- Even when things don't seem to work out for the best, the Transmitters never stop praying for people in need

Phyllis remembers having lunch with Oxsana Heckscher, who at the time was eager to have a baby, watching the biological clock ticking on her hopes

- Phyllis got lots of people praying for the Heckschers, until Steve finally gave her the good news: “You were praying too hard, Phyllis,” he said
- We should all remember to keep praying while they raise those triplets

Like Jim, Phyllis says her prayer ministry helps her as much as it does the people being prayed for: “It gives me a purpose, to serve the Lord.” It “brings me closer to God—we have a working relationship.”

- “You have to listen too,” she says. “That way you know you’re doing what the Lord wants, and that He’s with you.”

Phyllis began praying for the people of St. Timothy’s, but it quickly spread beyond that

- Folks from other churches and people with no church family told her about their needs, and she prayed for them
- The Transmitters are very generous in the way they include people—there are hundreds of names on their list, which stay there as long as necessary
- Quietly, without any fanfare or desire for recognition, Phyllis and the other Transmitters reach out to touch the wounds of the world with the healing hand of God
- If you put a name on our Sunday prayer list, Phyllis and the others will pray for them the next week

**Ann Pontius** lives in Highlands Ranch and has primary responsibility for the household and kids—her husband travels all over the world in his business

- She’s deeply involved in several community groups in addition to the church, where she sings in the choir and serves on the Vestry
- But for a long time Ann’s been wanted to take part in hands-on ministry with the needy
- Then one Sunday she saw an announcement about the St. Francis Center in the bulletin and thought, “I’d like to try that.”
- There were just three people the first time, and true to form, Ann impulsively volunteered to be the group’s coordinator

For a whole year Ann’s volunteer days were spent doing laundry—mountains of laundry (as if she didn’t have enough at home!)

- If you don’t know, the St. Francis Center is a day center for homeless people in downtown Denver, sponsored by the Episcopal Church
- In exchange for doing simple tasks like cleaning or sweeping, the guests can take a shower and pick out clean clothing
- Between donations pouring in, wet towels, and clothes recycled by the guests, there are never-ending piles of laundry

Last year one of our members invited Ann to attend a Gala fundraising dinner for the St. Francis Center, and she came away fired up about this ministry

- Mayor Hickenlooper’s speech was great, and it was exciting to see hundreds of people turn out to support this program
- But what moved Ann the most was hearing a formerly homeless man talk about how the center helped him turn his life around

On her first day there, Ann was impressed by the way guests at the St. Francis Center are treated with respect and dignity

- Everyone is greeted by name when they check in, and staff members politely take time to hear how things are going with them
- Boundaries for behavior are enforced in clear and calm ways, and though there may be hundreds of people sitting in the main room, the atmosphere is amazingly peaceful
- While there’s not any overt preaching, Ann sees this ministry as a public witness to the love and compassion of Jesus

Just a couple of months ago, Ann got to work directly with guests for the first time

- It was a real eye-opener for her to see what it meant to them to receive a letter or phone message, or to get access to a bag of their belongings stored at the Center
- She said it made her grateful for what she has, and taught her lessons about being a parent: “it shows me a better way to relate, a way that works”
- “Being of service to others is the foundation of vibrant living for me,” she said. “It gets me out of my head and softens my heart.”
- Ann remembers when she was ten or eleven her mom saying to her, “Stop your pity party and go help someone else.”
- The wisdom of those words is still sinking in, and serving at the St. Francis Center is helping with that process

I’m so grateful to these three people for offering their stories for me to share—and I hope you’ll forgive me for using only three

- There are so many other people here who quietly carry out ministries which touch the hearts and lives of people in need
- I’m sure they’d agree that being of service to others is truly a privilege
- Jim, Phyllis, and Ann have rewarding ministries, but they’re also faced with the same kinds of life challenges as the rest of us
- Somehow, though, they’re able to find the time and energy to reach out to others, and in the process grow in their own faith

- To paraphrase James, faith isn't separate from ministry—the two grow together, following the example of Jesus

In just a minute now (*At Carson Pike's celebration later this morning*) we're all going to renew our baptismal promises

- Jesus' baptism was a huge turning point, empowering him and setting him off on his public ministry
- Perhaps today could be a turning point for you as well
- After the service, go on downstairs to the Ministry Fair
- Look around and talk to people—there may be a small thing you could do that would make a big impact on one of our teams
- Our leaders are committed to providing organization and support so that your time and gifts will make a difference for others
- You'll get to meet people who share your interests and are also committed to actively following Jesus in ministry

The Letter of James asks, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?"

"Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith."  
*(James 2:14, 18)*