



Reflections by the Lake
Devotions for an Unordinary Time

June 18, 2020
from the Sermon Archives of Gaylord Lehman
Faith That Works
Carol Lehman Lucas

Today's sermon from the archives is one in which Dad addresses the subject of equality, a favorite topic of his throughout his ministry. As a member of the city's Human Relations Commission in the 60s and 70s, he advocated for school integration and frequently espoused views that were not always popular with the community or his congregation, during a time when hearts and minds all over the country, and especially in the South, were in the process of being stretched and changed. His version of a "responsible involvement in the world" included social and racial equality, and I have no doubt that, were he living today, he would be vocal in his support of the current movement for social change.

Enjoy!

Faith That Works
A Sermon by Gaylord Lehman
Based on Proverbs 22:1-2; James 2:1-5, 14-17
(Delivered September 9, 2012)

Sometimes unforgettable things happen in church. I remember one night the children's choir was singing and my grandson Jeff was about three. He didn't have his best choirboy manners on that night, so when his little choir came up to sing, he crawled on his hands and knees over to where I was sitting on the platform and said, "Grandpa, can we go home with you when this is over?"

I remember the night of the Christmas candlelighting service when one child became overzealous with his candle, lit his bulletin on fire, and scared us half to death.

I remember the Sunday morning when a man rose to speak as the sermon was beginning and said, "You have a woman minister in this church. She read the scripture and is sitting up on the platform. That is against what the Bible teaches. No church shall have a woman minister. It is

against God's law." The ushers knew we had a problem and they assisted him to the door and told him that was not the place to make his protest. Sometimes unforgettable things happen in church.

One day, long years ago, when the church was in its early stages, two people came in to worship. One of them was apparently well-to-do. He had great looking clothes on, fine jewelry, shoes polished, well put together. The usher, or whoever was watching the door, made a big fuss over this man, welcomed him, and escorted him to the best seat in the house. "This man looks like a good prospect," the usher thought. "He could really boost our budget. We'll lay some hospitality on him." Today we call that "kissing up."

The second man who came was a poor person, dirty clothes, hair a mess, didn't smell too good. He was asked to have a seat at the back near the door. The disciple named James saw this, got out his pen and legal pad, and wrote a letter of protest to the minister and elders of that church. He didn't like what he had seen and he said so. And then he goes on to make a few points that are so important that his protest letter ends up in the Bible.

The first point he makes is that all people are equal in God's sight. God values people who belong to the country club and also people who live on food stamps. God judges not the quality of a person's clothes, or the flashiness of her jewelry, or the color of a person's skin. God looks on the inside. God judges the condition of a person's heart. You know the words from your childhood, "Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight." James drives home his point: God loves each one as if he or she were the only one.

Letter in *Children's Letters to God*:

Dear God,

Who draws the lines around the countries on the map?

Did you do that?

Drawing lines between people has been going on throughout history. There was an ancient divide between Jews (the Old Testament good guys) and Gentiles (us, the bad guys). Jesus came to change all that.

Lines of class and race, education and income, religion and language criss-cross our world. Until 1920, in our country women could not vote. Men fought to keep women out of the ballot box. Until the 1960s, when civil rights laws were passed, black Americans could not vote. It took us a long time to realize that you cannot draw lines that discriminate against people because of the color of their skin. You can't shut people out because someone thinks they are better than someone else.

Drawing lines is natural and normal. But, when we imagine the people on the other side of the line are less than us, are less valuable than us, we are scandalizing the love of God. God knows nothing about our lines— not nationality, not homelessness, not skin color, not manners, not sexuality, not education or intelligence or the lack of it.

We may continue to draw our little lines. But God just reaches right across them like they weren't even there.

The second point is that religion, true religion, has more to do with how you live than with what you say you believe. James said, "You can't say that you believe that God in Jesus Christ loves all people and treat some of the people the way you have been treating them."

James' teaching is summarized in one verse: “Be *doers* of the word and not *hearers* only” (1:22). That's one of the best mission statements that the church could have. It's good for any church that claims the name Christian. Our job, our mission, our reason for being here is to “do the word,” to give expression to what we believe.

James' emphasis is on a faith that works. He said, you can't see a hungry man and say to him, “Peace. Keep warm. Have a nice day, and not buy that man a cup of soup. What kind of religion is that?” he asks. “Faith without works is dead..”

Charles Schultz, the creator of the “Peanuts” cartoon, knew a lot about the Bible. In one of his best cartoons, Charlie Brown and Linus are trudging through the snow. The wind is whipping the snow in blizzard conditions. Charlie and Linus are bundled up in their snowsuits with fur hats and gloves and scarves and boots. They encounter Snoopy, shivering, naked, in front of his doghouse. His dish is empty. He looks cold and hungry and miserable. Charlie Brown says, “Be of good cheer, Snoopy.” Linus echoes, “Yes, Snoopy, be of good cheer.” And off they go through the snow, leaving Snoopy with a puzzled, quizzical look on his face. As if to say, what kind of religion is that?

I heard recently about a man and his family who ate at a restaurant and instead of leaving a tip for the waitress he handed her something that he said was the most valuable thing he could give her. Instead of money, it was a leaflet telling her how to be saved. If I were that waitress I would have been steamed. It's a disgrace for any Christian to do that. He might have “heard” the gospel but he certainly found a cheap way of “doing” it. What kind of religion is that?

It's like the shoeshine man at the hotel put it as he commented on the ministers' convention that was meeting there. When asked about business he replied, “Tips are terrible but I sure have had a lot of ‘God bless you's.’” What kind of religion is that?

James was patterning his words after Jesus when he indicated that true religion was more than talking a good game. Talking is so much hot air. “Be of good cheer” doesn't get it. The “God bless you's” don't cut it.

A religious journal recently asked a group of Christian leaders to sum up in seven words or less the message of the gospel. Some of the respondents used fewer words than that. One said simply, “God really loves us.” Another said, “We are the church of infinite chances.” Still another said, “Though sinners, God welcomes us anyhow. Perhaps none of them improved on what Benjamin Franklin said three hundred years ago. What was his word? “Well **done** is better than well **said**.” He'd apparently been reading James and he nailed it.

Deliver Meals on Wheels. Give food to feed hungry children over the weekends when they have no school lunches. Support the local soup kitchen. If you just come to church and say, “Be of good cheer,” and “God bless you,” what kind of religion is that?

Years ago they made Bibles that had a zipper on them. Remember? Perhaps you had one. They zipped all the way around. I'll bet that back in some neglected closet of this church there is a zipper Bible. I always wondered, why would you want to put a zipper on the Bible? Unzip it! Let the message out. Air it out. Let it fly free. Get it off the pages and out into the world. Live it! Do it!

Your Christian faith is something you DO! Amen.