

**FAITH IN ACTION**  
James 2:1-10, 14-17

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
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It was a strange week, or at least it seemed that way to me. Labor Day didn't bring a feeling of change in the air, not the way it usually does - instead, Labor Day blew in hot temperatures, so uncomfortably dangerously hot that schools were closed for two days this week. I never remember that happening before.

The New York Times published an anonymous piece written by someone described as a senior official in the White House, raising questions, not for the first time, about the health of our democracy.

In Cincinnati, a place where all of us know people, a gunman with 200 rounds of ammunition entered a busy workplace.

Meanwhile, we have our lives to lead. Bible Study resumes, the church is busy with preparations for the fall season. Our preschool welcomes in its students for the first day of school. I keep up with news from our church family. One woman undergoes surgery, another begins a new job, another prepares to return to work after maternity leave. People call me to schedule baptisms, Christmas concerts, to ask for financial assistance.

This is a week when we need the good news. This is a Sunday when we long to be reminded that there are truths that are enduring, and wisdom that is timeless.

We're drawn back to the person of Jesus, this carpenter from Nazareth who preached and lived a way of life that is compelling in its authenticity. He loved his enemies. Though he was poor, he confronted the powers of his day fearlessly. He

embraced all people. In his presence we find hope, and a grounding that makes us feel at home in this strange and confusing time.

Our passage for today comes from the first century after Jesus. The church is still new, but already it's encountering some internal conflicts. Not all people are being treated the same. If someone who looks wealthy comes into the church, that person is fawned all over. If someone who looks like a street person comes into the church, that person is shunned. The letter of James speaks against that kind of favoritism. And James goes on to say that faith becomes real when we put it into action. Quite bluntly, he says, "If you don't put your faith into action, your faith is dead."

This passage has been the source of great debate among Christians over the centuries, because it seems to contradict something that Paul says. In Romans, Paul emphasizes the importance of grace. He writes that our good works do not win God's favor. God CHOOSES to love us. It is a free gift. We don't, we **can't** do anything to earn it or deserve it. We call that grace.

Grace is what gets us in the door, if you will. There's no password. You don't have to present any letters of recommendation, or have a certain grade point average. The doors are wide open and all people are welcome. God's embrace is universal. It's for people who have made mistakes, people who have more questions than answers, even people who are angry with God. But once we're in the door, once we pass through the waters of baptism, and claim for ourselves the name "Christian", "follower of Jesus", then we are expected to change. Once we accept the fact that we are accepted and loved by God, unconditionally, once we begin to settle into the fact that God has forgiven us, that God continually renews us, it is expected that we will be new and different people. We will look and act as if we have been...ARE BEING transformed. "If anyone

is in Christ,” the scripture says, “that person is new and re-created. The old is gone, the new has come.”

We don't do good deeds to earn God's favor. We don't chaperone mission trips to chalk up a good score with God. We don't participate in the Weekend of Service because we want God to love us. Rather, those good deeds are a natural outpouring of the love we feel for God and for the world and the people God loves. Participating in the work of love saves us...I don't mean it stamps our ticket. I mean it saves us from feeling helpless and hopeless. It saves us from despair.

Every week we pray, “Thy kingdom come.” We are telling God that we understand God's will for the world, God's desire that this earth be more like heaven...we're on board with that plan, and we know we have a part to play. Every act of kindness and generosity makes a difference. Here's how one writer puts it:

“What you DO in the present - by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself — will last into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether....They are part of what we may call *building for God's kingdom.*”

That's what it means to put our faith into action. It means engaging in service, in small ways and large ways, as part of our every day lives. Not just one week or weekend a year, but making it a way of life. Here's what is so amazing about the way God works, and the way God has created us. Living this way is not a burden. It's not in any way a punishment. Living this way is a joy.

During the Weekend of Service, Doug and I helped with the cookout at Road to Hope, a sober living facility. Doug and Roger Welling were on grill duty most of the time, and it was HOT. I was a runner, bringing them water, bringing food back and forth. Others from our group were playing with children, setting up games, serving food inside. What we all had in common was our enthusiasm. There was a spirit in that place that was contagious, a real sense of community. All of the residents and their family members were grateful and appreciative, but we didn't feel that there was a distance between those of us who were serving and those who were being served. Rather we felt like we were all a part of something bigger than ourselves.

The opioid epidemic has claimed so many lives in our county, and here we were in a room full of people who were trying to survive, one day, one hour at a time. If a few hot dogs and some pasta salad could help them feel less alone, remind them that others are cheering them on, well, I'd gladly spend more Sunday afternoons that way. It was a holy experience.

After the food was all served, Doug and I sat down for a few minutes with Jeff, the director at Road to Hope. We heard a bit of his own inspiring story. He has been in recovery 18 years himself. He and his wife and their three children are giving their lives to the challenge of taking individuals out of dysfunctional living environments and fatal states of mind and body and helping to transform them into happier, healthier, motivated members of the community. Jeff says he often finds himself drawing on the secret weapon God has equipped him with: "an unparalleled network of individuals and volunteers who step in and impact the lives of those people he is called to serve."

His bio on the Road to Hope website includes this note. Jeff's motivation for life is something that came from an instrumental person in his life. Her name was Becky and she said this: "Nobody said it would be easy, but it will be worth it."

Today we are celebrating our Faith Formation programs, honoring our Sunday School teachers and other volunteers. Faith Formation isn't just for children, of course. Our Bible Study, Cross Training classes, retreats, and book groups all provide ongoing adult education. But we are also formed by the things that we do. Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others. Every time we engage in an act of service, in a spirit of love, we are experiencing formation and transformation.

Do you remember the last story Jesus tells in the Sermon on the Mount: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and PUTS THEM INTO PRACTICE is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and DOES NOT PUT THEM INTO PRACTICE is like a foolish man who build his house on the sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." Jesus basically said, 'In summary, do this. Whoever puts my teachings into practice will experience the joy of service, the miracle of transformation, and that person will better survive the storms of life.'

As this new year of programming, of ministry and mission in our church begins, let us be grateful that we have been called into a way of life that nourishes us spiritually, that strengthens us to face our own challenges, and that brings us a sense of joy and meaning and purpose.