

"Your Works Are What Matter to God"  
Rev. Bill Freeman  
October 30, 2016  
Menifee United Church of Christ

A parochial elementary school, St. Peter, Paul and Mary, was on lunch. Children were lined up in the lunch line. There was a tray of apples there and next to the tray a teacher had written, "Take only one. Remember, God is watching you." A little further along the line, there was a tray of cookies and a fifth-grade boy had written a note saying, "Take as many cookies as you want. Remember, God is watching the apples." That fifth-grader was probably not doing good. Although probably when I was in fifth grade I would have done the same thing.

Doing good. Doing good works. What does it mean to do good? To do good works? Well, it probably means to help others and not to harm others. What is the oath that doctors take? "First do no harm." We shouldn't do harm. But what does it mean to do good? Probably The Golden Rule comes into play here. "Do unto others as you would have them do to you." We are to help others. We don't want somebody to harm us, so we shouldn't harm others. We want others to help us, so we should help others. That's what doing good, doing good works, means.

Jesus wants us to do good works. Jesus encounters a man who is going to do good works. Jesus is passing through Jericho. There's a man there named Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but Zacchaeus, who is a tax collector and who is rich, is also short, so he climbs up a sycamore tree to get a look at Jesus. As Jesus passes through Jericho, he stops at the sycamore tree and looks up in the tree and says, "Zacchaeus, come down here! I'm going to stay with you today." So Zacchaeus climbs down and goes with Jesus, and people around them are grumbling, "What's Jesus doing going with this sinner?" Apparently when they get to Zacchaeus' house, Zacchaeus says, "Look, Jesus, I'm going to sell half my possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. And if there's anybody I've defrauded, anybody I've ripped off, then I'm going to give that person four times as much." Jesus is pleasantly surprised and he says, "Today salvation has come to this house." He says, "Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham and he has achieved salvation." Jesus said, "I've come to save the lost." And apparently Zacchaeus was lost, but has now been found. Zacchaeus the name means "pure." So this day, apparently, Jesus purified Zacchaeus, apparently just by being near Zacchaeus Jesus purified him, Jesus made him do good, do good works. That's what Jesus would have us do. To do good. To do good works. Zacchaeus has achieved salvation because he's a son of Abraham. I think Jesus would say of us that we are sons and daughters of Abraham. That when we do good, when we do good works, we will have achieved salvation. If we don't do good, if we don't do good works, then we won't achieve salvation. But when we do, we will have achieved salvation.

James, the brother of Jesus, says that works matter. In James, the second chapter, James writes that "Faith without works is dead." Faith without works is dead? Wow. In other words, if you come to church every Sunday, if you read the Bible every evening, if you pray morning, noon and night, but if you don't do good, if you don't do good works, it doesn't mean a hill of beans to God. We have to do good. We have to do good works.

God doesn't want us just to talk the talk. God wants us to walk the talk. Help an elderly lady across the street. Or across the church parking lot, as the case may be. Make up bags of Thanksgiving dinner to give to the needy. Make a bag of Christmas dinner to give to the poor, as we hope this congregation will do this coming Thanksgiving week and this Christmas week. Make up a bag for Thanksgiving food, maybe a canned ham and sweet potatoes and other things for Thanksgiving week and another bag for Christmas week. We want to help the needy. We want to do good.

Welcome the stranger! Whether the stranger is white or whether the stranger is a person of color. Whether the stranger is straight or whether the stranger is gay. Whether the stranger is good-looking or whether the stranger looks like me. No! Wait a minute! Welcome the stranger. Help everybody. That's what God would have us do.

Isaiah confirms that God wants us to do good. In the second book of Isaiah, Isaiah writes on behalf of God, "I don't care about your donations. I don't care about your prayers. I don't care about your incense." Isaiah continues speaking on behalf of God, "Don't do evil. Do good. Help the widow. Help the orphan." Isaiah continues speaking for the still-speaking God, "When you do good, when you do good works, you will eat the good of the land." I think Jesus would say it slightly differently. "When you do good, when you do good works, you will achieve salvation." Alleluia!

"Faith is all that matters to God." That's what some people believe. Faith is all that matters to God. You could be a Mafia hit man, killed dozens of people in your life, but as long as you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, at the end of your life you're good to go, you're good to go to heaven, you're saved. You've achieved salvation. By the way, when I was a news director at a Christian radio station, I interviewed a Mafia hit man. It was kind of weird. I asked him, "How many people have you killed in your life?" He was a former Mafia hit man who became a Christian. He said, "I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you." When people say that, it's usually a joke: "If I tell you, I'd have to kill you." I don't think this guy was kidding. I don't think this was a joke. But anyway.

"Faith without works is dead," is what James says. A lot of people believe that faith is all you need. Faith is all that matters to God. Is that true? James would say no. The apostle Paul would say yes, faith is all you need. What do I say? I say, let's hedge our bets and have both faith and works. Faith works.

Stephen Colbert, in addition to being a delightful host of The Late Show on CBS, is a devout Catholic. He goes to Mass. He teaches Sunday School. I believe he's a person of faith and I believe he's a person of works. Stephen Colbert says, "If we're going to be a Christian nation, that doesn't help the poor, that doesn't help the needy, then we're fooling ourselves. If we're going to be a Christian nation, but we don't want to help the poor and we don't want to serve the needy and we just want to ignore what Jesus taught us, then we have to admit that yes, Jesus said those things, but we just don't want to do them. Ouch. Stephen Colbert, I think, was speaking from his heart, and what he said I think we should take to heart.

How about you? Do you want us to be a Christian nation in name only? Or do you want us to be a Christian nation that lives up to the name of Jesus? Do you want us to be a Christian nation that says to the poor, "Get a job, you bum!" or do you want us to be a Christian nation that helps the poor and serves the needy? I think I know how you'd answer that. Do we want to be Christians who live up to the name of Jesus? Or do we want to be Christians in name only? I think I know how you'd answer that, too, you've proven it over the past several years that I've been here. You want to be a Christian that helps the poor, that helps the needy, that serves the needy at Thanksgiving and Christmas. I believe when we are Christians that live up to the name of Jesus, that Jesus would say to us, "Today salvation has come to this place."

Let us pray:  
God of love, help us to do good.  
Help us to do good works,  
And help us to achieve salvation,  
Now and forevermore,  
By the power of the Holy Spirit,  
And in the name of Jesus.  
Amen.