

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

A Faith That Works

Revelation 2:2-4

Sunday, March 26, 2023

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Is your faith working for you? Is it making a difference in your life? Does it help you overcome obstacles and give you strength for living? Or does it feel like a numbing obligation?

I come across a lot of people who grew up in very religious homes. They went to church every Sunday. They said their prayers. They memorized scripture. But as they get older they find that the faith they grew up with is not working for them anymore.

Sometimes they are college students who have more questions than answers. Sometimes they are adults who go through a crisis and the faith of their childhood no longer works. Others grew up in fundamentalist households where faith was legalism and rule following, and they want to get as far away from the church as possible. And some have been in healthy churches for awhile and their faith has simply dried up.

You need to know that I have a heart for people who have these struggles. I hope Johns Creek UMC is a church that doesn't judge them but instead embraces them, loves them, and helps to revitalize their faith.

One of the reasons I have a heart for people who struggle with having a faith that works is that I often have the same hang ups about religion that they do. I don't like faith being reduced to rule following. I don't believe that doubting is a bad thing. I don't believe you have to check your brain at the door when you come to church. When I share this with them, they feel liberated, and they are open to hearing how they can renew their faith and find strength from it again.

This is exactly what I would like for you today. If you feel like your walk with Jesus has turned into a limp. If you are spiritually exhausted and your faith feels weak, take heart. I am about to share how you can re-energize your faith so that it works for you again.

You see, it has been my experience that when people find their faith is not working for them they usually have forgotten the single most important idea about the Christian faith. It is not a principle. It is not a doctrine. And it is not a rule. It is an idea communicated to the church at Ephesus in the book of Revelation. The church was trying to stay faithful in the midst of persecution by the Roman government. By all appearances they were doing a good job. Yet, the Lord looked beyond their religiosity, beyond their orthodoxy, and beyond their morality and knew they had forgotten what was most important.

So, the Lord inspired John to write a letter to the Ephesian church, urging them, pleading with them to get back to where it all began. Listen to these words carefully because they reveal the heart of God:

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. -Revelation 2:2-4

In other words, God was saying to the church: "I see your good works, but I am not very impressed. In fact, I am disappointed because you have forgotten your first love. You have forgotten your love for me. You have forgotten your relationship with me. You have forgotten that I am the one who empowers you to live your life."

The point of our faith is not a principle but a person. Jesus Christ does not point the way; he is the way.

So, through our passage today the Lord is saying to us, "What pleases me is not just your good works, even though they are important. What pleases me is when you let me near you. What pleases me is when you let me walk with you. What pleases me is when you let me love you."

The single most important thing to remember about your faith is that it is not a religion; it is a relationship. If you forget that, your faith will never work. It will never make a difference in your life. Religion is about following rules but Christianity is about following Jesus Christ. Religion is exhausting, following Christ is life giving.

Everything begins and flows out of our relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Don't ever forget that you are a child of God and God loves you more than you could ever imagine. God's love for you is not based on your status, performance or how successful you are. God loves you because you are God's child.

Wayne Cordeiro talks about the time when he went to church to hear a preschool put on a Christmas concert. When he arrived, he could hardly get into the fellowship hall. It was

packed because every parent was there with a camera and the brightest flash known to humankind.

After a few moments, the children filed in and filled up the risers. The boys were in the back and the girls were in the front. They had on cute little red capes with glitter in their hair. One willing hearted teacher (there is always at least one gracious person to do this) walked in front of the risers and tried to get all of the kids to look at her, but it wasn't happening. The kids were too busy trying to locate their parents.

These kids were about three years old and they could not speak in complete sentences, let alone sing in full measures of music. Yet, undaunted, the teacher lifted up her hands and began what was really a solo, "Joy the World!" And these kids did not care about singing. All they did was find their parents and scream out, "Hi Mommy! Hi Daddy!" And she just kept singing, "Joy to the World!" Just then a boy in the back part of the risers fell backwards and bravely took four others with him – BANG! And she kept singing, "Joy to the World!"

It was absolute chaos, formless and void. Soon the song was over and every parent jumped to their feet and gave the kids a standing ovation. And they all took pictures. And boy, did they take pictures! It looked like Haley's Comet went straight through the room! Everyone was so proud.

Right after the concert finished Cordeiro walked with the families to a side room for refreshments. As he was enjoying the refreshments, he thought to himself, "That has got to be the worst concert I have ever heard. We all gave a standing ovation to the worst concert I ever heard. They just took pictures of the worst concert ever!" But then he saw it. He saw a dad pick up his daughter and say, "You did so good. I am so proud of you!"

You see, those parents did not applaud because of the performance. They applauded because their children were up there. The applause was based upon a relationship.

And when I get back in touch with that I sense the Lord say to me, "This is why I applaud you. It has nothing to do with your performance. It has everything to do with the fact that I have a relationship with you and you are my child." And I started to move back to my first love and realized that what pleases me is my relationship with God.

We all need to get back to our first love. For, often times, many in the church have a second-hand faith in Jesus. We hear other people talk about God, and we begin to put this picture of Jesus together based on everyone's faith experiences. We add to the picture a pithy saying or something we read in a book. We come to church perhaps because the music is so good or the programs are so good. And Jesus says, "I am not asking you to know about me. I want you to know me!"

Everything flows out of our relationship with God in Christ.

When we are in tune with that relationship some wonderful things happen to us. This morning I want to share what they are:

Power to Change

God molds us and shapes us into his image. God is the one that does the molding, not us. On our own power we could never change. But within God's embrace we are given the love and power to be the people we have been created to be. The power to change comes from a relationship!

When I first met Brandy I quickly learned that she and I had different musical tastes. I like hard rock, blues and jazz. She likes pop music and "boy bands." One day I was doing some shopping for Christmas, and I was thinking about what I could get Brandy. Suddenly, I was overtaken by something completely irrational. I walked straight into a store that sold concert tickets, laid down my credit card and said, "Give me the two best seats to the next 'N' Sync' concert!"

We went to the concert. It was at Tampa Bay stadium. I think we were the oldest people there. The average age was about 13. It rained like crazy, and, of course, we were on the ground, so we did not have any cover. I was silently praying they would cancel the concert, but they didn't. After some delay, the concert began, and I have never heard more piercing screams in all my life. It was total chaos. But I looked at Brandy and she was having such a good time. So, I started to listen to the music, and, at the risk of getting beat up by my buddies, I have to tell you that I started to have a good time!

I would have never attended that concert or enjoyed it if it was not for my love for Brandy and the relationship I have with her. Because of my relationship with Brandy change was easy. The power to change comes from a relationship.

So often I forget this and I say to God, "Lord, this change you want me to make in my life is too difficult. I can't do it." And the Lord says, "Just come closer to me. Just come closer to the cross and I will give you the power to change." Then I realize that the change he is asking of me is not so difficult.

This is what John 5:3 says, "And this is the love of God – that you keep his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome." Why are they not burdensome? Because of the love relationship we have with Christ. You see, love has what we call a "creative affinity," which means the more you love something the more you become like that thing in which you love.

Ever seen those older couples and they look just like one another? Walk the same, talk the same, even look the same. How does that happen? Their love for each other.

It is the same way with our relationship with God. When we love God with all we have and all that we are, we are shaped by that love and reflect God's love in the world. In a loving relationship with God the power to change is given.

Power to Forgive

Forgiveness is not easy for any of us. It is hard to forgive. Resentment is much easier. But you know what they say about resentment: "Resentment is like taking a poison and waiting for the other person to die."

Maybe you are filled with resentment and bitterness and it is destroying you. You can't seem to let go of it. Maybe you are estranged from people you love and it is just tearing you up. Maybe you can't seem to let go of the past. You want to find healing and restoration in your relationships but you don't know how to do it. It's affecting work, your faith, your family life, and your ability to enjoy life. The only way to healing and freedom is to begin the process of forgiveness. It may take some time, but isn't the health of your soul and body worth it?

Philip Yancey loves to tell the true story about a little village in Spain. A Father and son in that village had an argument, and awful things were said. The son, a boy named Paco, ran away to the big city of Madrid.

Weeks go by, then months, and the father begins to feel awful about what he said. He rehearses over and over again the apology he will give to his son when he returns. Yet Paco does not come back. The Father begins to fear he has lost his son forever, so he comes up with a plan. He travels to Madrid and puts up posters everywhere. He also takes out a classified ad in the newspaper. The posters and the ad say:

Dear Paco,

*Meet me in front of the newspaper office tomorrow at noon.
All is forgiven.*

I Love you. Your father.

Now, "Paco" is a very common name in Spain - like "John" or "Jim" in our country. Remember too that the father did not sign his posters, or his classified ad, with anything except "Your father."

By twelve o'clock the next day Paco is waiting outside the newspaper building; he and his father have a joyful reunion. Yet along with the son, there are 800 other men named Paco, gathered there, hoping to reconcile with their father.

Is there someone in your life that you need to forgive? Can you see their face? Who is it? Only you and God know. But you will never truly free until forgive. How do you do it? As I have grown in my relationship with Christ and reflect on how many times he has loved and forgiven me when I have not deserved it, the easier it is for me to forgive. 1st John 4:19 says, "We love because he first loved us." In Luke 7 Jesus reminds us when forgiving the woman who put oil on his feet that "He who has been forgiven much loves much."

I was reminded of this the other night when my sister Jill and

I and her friend Bob went out to dinner. It was just a few days after we moved here. Brandy and Paul were off visiting some of Brandy's childhood friends and it gave me a chance to spend some time with my sister. We looked around for a good place to eat and we passed "City BBQ." Someone had told me that it was about to open and it was supposed to be really good. Well, cars were in the parking lot and people were going in, so we assumed the place was open.

When we walked in the front door a hostess with a clipboard met us and asked, "Are you registered?" "Registered for what?" I asked. She told me that the restaurant was not open yet. They were having a special opening just for VIP's and guests of the owner. I said, "Well, in that case, my name is Charley Reeb, and I am the new mayor of Johns Creek." She looked stunned. I said, "Just kidding." We joked around a little more, and then she leaned over and said, "Don't say anything, but ya'll can go in." We were thrilled!

When we walked in to the restaurant, we were met by another hostess with a big smile. She handed us a coupon and said, "You can use this the next time you are here, but tonight everything is on us." What?! Jill and I looked at each other and couldn't believe our ears. We certainly picked the right place to eat! We ordered a feast fit for a king and ate like we were committing a crime! We had a ball. At the end of the meal we asked the manager how we should handle the tip. He replied, "No need to tip. We include tips in our employee's paychecks." So we walked out of there without spending a dime. It was glorious! It was grace!

But imagine if I had turned to Jill and Bob and said, "Listen, this was my idea, so tally up the cost of your meal and give me what you owe." That would sound ludicrous, wouldn't it? We were all showered with grace. For me to expect some kind of payment would be to betray the grace I had been given.

It is the same way when we experience the amazing grace of God in Christ and then turn around and not offer that grace to others. It's really ridiculous when you think about it.

Our relationship with Christ and the grace he has given to us gives us the power to forgive.

Power Over Fear

We all have fears. Even though we try to act like we have it all together, each one of us is afraid of something. I don't know what fears you bring in to worship today. But one thing I do is that the love of God is greater than fear.

I can't think of a better passage of scripture that conveys the power God gives us over fear than this one:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

-Romans 8:35, 37-39

Our love relationship with God is stronger than pain, crisis, even death. God's love will never be separated from us. And it is our love relationship with God that gives strength for living and victory through any circumstance. Since God and his love is always with us this we don't have to be afraid of anything.

Sue Monk Kidd is a well-known author. She wrote *The Secret Life of Bees*. King Duncan writes about the time when she was pregnant with her second child. "Her three-year-old son, Bob, was afraid of the dark. Sue tried everything. She tried leaving a light on in the hall and a night-light on in Bob's room. Nothing she did helped; he was still scared of the dark and would cry out in the middle of the night.

"One night as she held him against her to comfort him, he touched her round abdomen. Little Bob asked, 'Mama, is it dark inside there where my little brother is?' He was convinced that his yet unborn sister would be a boy.

'Yes,' his loving mother replied, 'it's dark in there.'

As Bob thought further he asked, 'He doesn't even have a night-light, does he?'

'No,' Sue responded, 'not even a night-light.'

"Then Bob hugged his mother as she patted his head. Bob had one more question for this mother that night, 'Do you think my brother is scared all by himself in there?'

"I don't think so,' Sue explained, 'because he's not really alone. He's inside of me,' It was a very special moment between mother and son. Suddenly Sue had an inspiration. 'And it's the same way with you.' Sue explained to her son. 'When it's dark and you think you're all by yourself, you really aren't. I carry you inside me too. Right here in my heart.'

"Sue remembers looking into her son's eyes, wondering if he understood what she meant. Having nothing else to say, Bob went back to bed and was soon asleep. That was the last time he woke up during the night scared.

"Sue Monk Kidd, reflecting on that conversation with her son, wrote, 'So it is with God. First God was only 'up there' explains Sue Monk Kidd. "Then God was 'all around.' Next I began to see that God was also 'within me.' And now, most shocking of all," Sue says, "I was finding that I am and always was 'within God'" (Duncan, "Help Me Make It Through the Night").

It's true. God carries each of us in his heart, and, therefore, we don't have to be afraid. Get back to your first love. Get back to the heart of God. Get back to your relationship with him and you will find the power to change, the power to forgive and power over fear.