

“Faith That Works”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 8, 2024 - Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

[James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37](#)

Happy Rally Day! It’s good to be here together today as we begin a new journey as a church family into a new school year. We are gathered, full of hopeful expectation for what lies ahead, wondering what kinds of wonders God will reveal in this life we share in the days ahead. I hope that you are full of hope that the wonders will be wonderfully good and will help us grow as people and as a community.

One thing I know for sure on this newly broken morning is that the wonders to be revealed today and tomorrow will not be the same as those that were revealed yesterday, last year, or to previous generations. This is a new day and we are rallying in new ways, no matter the wonderful ways we rallied together in the past.

It’s important to keep this in mind as one of our tendencies as people is to look at the realities of the day and how they differ from the realities of the past and to be troubled by the ways that things have changed. It is easy on days like this to remember (or imagine) the “good old days,” when the church was full of people on Rally Sundays (and every other Sunday as well), and to be saddened that our society has changed in ways that have caused the pews of our church, like the pews of so many other churches across the nation, to have less people in them than there were back then.

While I certainly would prefer for more of our people to be with us here today (and every other Sunday as well), I am glad that you have chosen to be here now, and I hope that you’re not so stuck looking back at the glory days of yesteryear that you are oblivious to the goodness that God is revealing among us and in your life in this moment and that you are unable to follow where Christ is leading us as we are right now.

I believe that it is good to know your history -- both the good and the bad -- but not to be mired down by trying to live in the past. For God does not desire for us

as people or a church to be stuck in lamenting lost glories or ruminating on the sins of yesterday, but to freely move in new directions of God's choosing today.

Thanks be to God we are not destined to follow all the ways of our ancestors, especially the ways that caused harm to themselves or others, nor are we doomed to repeating their failures. Moved by God's unbound Spirit, we can all change for the better.

One of the ways we have already done so here as a church community is in striving to have our welcoming practices align more closely with those taught in our scriptures. Consider our first reading from the letter of James, which instructs us to not give better seats in our gatherings to those who have more wealth, but isn't that exactly what we did in this room for so many years? Now it was before our lifetimes, but the members of this church used to pay annually for the seats that they and their families sat in during our worship services. And, this may not surprise you, the best seats went to those who could pay the most. I have here the "rental" rates of our different seating areas from 1892, several of which were available at the time. Can any of you guess how much the most expensive half-pew-length seating area was? They went for \$50 (or more than \$1,500 in today's money). Those best seats were in the center of the sanctuary, with the less desirable (and less expensive) areas being on the sides and in the back. Brian is now sitting in one of our cheap seats, which cost a mere \$4 for the year (or about \$120 today) and was a full dollar more expensive than the seats of the last two rows of the balcony, which at \$3 a seat were the least expensive ones in the building.

Fortunately, our spiritual ancestors (who are for some of us literal ancestors), saw a better way, along with many other churches, by moving away from this system of paying for your seat, when in 1914 the church began supporting itself through voluntary contributions and the pews were open and free for all. In this act, the community lived out more perfectly the instructions of brother James to show no partiality for the rich by reserving the finest seats for them in our gatherings. And in many other ways over the years since 1914 we have moved towards being more welcoming and inclusive of all people, no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey, and so have moved out of old ways from older days in to live in better new ways in new days.

Embracing new ways, especially when they help us to live out our faith more perfectly, is an action that flows out of our spiritual identity as followers of Jesus as he, too, embraced new ways over the days of his lifetime. We heard one episode of him embracing new ways in our gospel lesson from Mark, which tells the story of Jesus as he traveled through the region of Tyre, which was gentile country, and met a gentile woman there who begged for him to heal her gentile daughter. Rather than responding by healing her daughter right away, Jesus held to the traditions of his ancestors and considered healing the unwell gentile child to be outside the scope of his mission, which was to serve the children of Israel and not to those outside of the Jewish family, who were considered not to be fellow beloved children of God, but were more like unclean dogs. The woman persisted in asking for Jesus to show mercy, humbly exclaiming that even family dogs are welcome to eat the leftovers after the children have eaten. Moved by her humility and faithful persistence, Jesus healed her daughter, and it appears that he changed as well, for we read that immediately following his reluctant healing, he met a man in the gentile region of Sidon, who was unable to hear or speak, and without hesitation Jesus touched and healed him also.

Jesus mission of mercy was expanded as he healed in these gentile regions, and I believe that in his interactions with people there, as he met these gentiles and God's mercy flowed through him to them, he would have been more expanded as a person, recognizing that these gentiles were also fellow beloved children of God and worthy of being dignified as such by receiving God's gifts. This was a new, more welcoming way for Jesus, and it became an example for the earliest communities of his followers to imitate as they welcomed and included all -- Jews and gentiles, rich and poor -- into their fellowship.

New ways for new days was the better way of Jesus and the first Christians, and this remains as our way to be today. So, on this new day, let us have a faith that works in new ways to dignify all people in our midst and to expand our mission of offering God's mercy to others, especially to those who feel uninvited to God's table, who feel unworthy to receive the gifts of God, or who feel unwelcomed by those already seated at the table of blessing. Let us not be so constrained by our memories of how things were, that we fail to follow Christ as we are led today in new directions that will bring greater grace to our children and that will better

bless all of the generations to come; instead, let us rally and ourselves move into receiving greater grace from our loving creator. Amen.