

“A Living Faith”  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’, or, ‘Sit at my feet’, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that has been promised to those who love God? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

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It was the start of the church program year and Church School was back in full swing. The teachers decided to work through the Bible from the beginning and share important stories. The kids were learning about how God created the cosmos, and the earth, and the plants, and animals, and even the people. One little boy was especially interested when a teacher explained how, in the creation story, Eve had been created from one of Adam’s ribs. Later that week

the little boy's mother noticed him lying down as though he were ill. She asked, "What's the matter? Are you feeling alright?" The little boy responded, "I have a pain in my side. I think I'm going to have a wife."

As scary as that is, especially for some of us, it is indeed good to be together today as we begin a new program year in the life of New England Congregational Church. It's exciting to get a fresh start every September! We don't typically think of fall being a season of new beginnings – that's spring – but school starts in the fall and so does a brand-new church program year. And this year will be even better than the last one: we're kicking off our great Kids'Zone and Youth Group programs today and we're following it up with Fall Festival on the south lawn. The bell choirs have begun rehearsing, the Chancel Choir is back and better than ever. And we're delighted to be welcoming Daniel Segner to the organ bench.

Over the next few weeks and months, the Women's Circle of Friends and Friday Night at the Movies programs will resume. Our 14-student Confirmation program will recommence and with our New Director of Youth Ministries, Katie Jepson, at the helm. Board and committee work will ramp up, special service projects, events, and education opportunities like the Giving Bus, Poker Night, Trunk-or-Treat, Adult Advent Study, and Angel Tree will be popping up. And of course we'll have special services for Reformation Day, All Saints, Advent, and Christmas. And that's just the next four months!

Looking ahead at all the immediate future holds for us here at New England Church, I'm really excited and I hope you are too. But, as we begin this new program year, our text from the book of James will, I think, help to ground us as we move forward together.

Writing to an early church or churches, the author of James begins this text with a portrait of injustice in the Christian community with the wealthy and well-dressed being given places of honor in the gathered community, while the poor are treated as second-class Christians and expected to stand or serve as footstools for the wealthy. "Not in this church!" exclaims James. "If you really want to be the church," James says, "Don't show favoritism . . . don't

judge . . . love your neighbor as yourself . . . clothe the naked and feed the hungry . . . because faith without works is dead.”

As we gather today for the start of a fresh program year, what is the message in this passage from James for us? Here’s what I think: exploring faith traditions with our kids and youth, hosting fellowship events, offering adult studies, and doing “service” projects is not what we as Christians are called to do. Now, you may be thinking “Wait a minute, Reverend, you just nixed the entire program that five minutes ago you were so excited about!” Perhaps, but for effect, let me say it again: exploring faith traditions with our kids and youth, hosting fellowship events, offering adult studies, and doing “service” projects is not what we as Christians are called to do. No. According to our reading from James, we are called to treat all people as equals, to refrain from judging, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to clothe the naked and feed the hungry. Why? Because faith without works is dead.

Now, let me back up just a little. All the things I mentioned earlier – the very things that *I am* so excited about as we begin a new program year here at New England Church – these things can be the means through which we put our faith into action. Through our partnership with local schools, children have the supplies they need, the shoes they need, and the mentors they need to thrive. Stocking shelves at the Interfaith Food Pantry and supporting their work financially means that hungry people are being fed. Our bold Welcome Statement, wide-open welcome, and commitment to providing genuine hospitality at all New England Church functions are a testament to our passion for inclusion and our fervent desire to see all people treated as equals—here and in every facet of our society; our programs of Education and Faith Nurture for all ages help equip us with the theological rationale for who we are and why we do what we do; and our fundraising efforts ensure that we keep having the resources to do it. I am genuinely excited about all that this program year has in store for us and for our broader community. But truly, these things are means to an end.

Put simply, I think our text from James reiterates that most basic of Christian calls, the call to be a blessing to one another and to our world. That is what we are called to do – who and what we are called to be. A blessing. And that looks like more than just believing the right things or adopting the right

statements or telling the right stories. Being a blessing looks like treating all people as equals. It looks like not judging one another. It looks like loving our neighbors as ourselves. It looks like clothing the naked and feeding the hungry. And it looks like using any and every means at our disposal as individuals and as a community of faith to live into our calling—to *be* that blessing, because faith without works is dead.

As we begin another program year today, I would invite—no I would urge—that we measure every program, worship service, activity, and undertaking that we engage or consider as a community against this one simple rubric: through it, are we being a blessing? We teach the stories of our faith to equip us with the lessons we need to be a blessing. We raise money, not to keep the lights on, but to be a blessing. We operate partner with local schools and service agencies to be a blessing. We welcome our neighbors for fellowship and fun at New England Church to be a blessing. We treat all people as equals, and refrain from judging, and love our neighbors as ourselves, and clothe the naked and feed the hungry to be a blessing. Why? Because faith without works is dead – it is no faith at all.

And so, today as we move into yet another new program year, let us be grounded in James' vision, which, not surprisingly is also Jesus' vision, that we, the church, be a blessing for one another and for our world. That is *who* we are and *why* we are and *what* we are about. For us, it's everything. May this not just be *any other* program year. May this be the year when *all* that we do together is done to be a blessing.

May it be so. Amen.