

## **The Vows of Church Membership: 4. Service**

James 2.14-18  
Mason United Methodist Church  
14 March 2010

A pastor was leaving the church one Sunday after services and noticed a large, gleaming motor home parked out by the curb. Seeing the out-of-state license plate, and thinking the owners might be lost, he stopped to introduce himself and offer possible directions. While talking with the traveling family at the motor home's door, he mentioned what a beautiful vehicle it was. The owner replied, "Yes. We really enjoy it. And would you believe it sleeps ten people comfortably! By the way, pastor, how many people can your church hold?" With a playful grin, the pastor said, "Oh, it can sleep about four hundred."

And here we are, gathered in a worship *service*. And believe me when I say, I *do* want you to be comfortable.

The focus of this series of five sermons comes from the covenant made when a person joins the United Methodist Church. The covenant question is found in our hymnal and reads: "Will you...uphold [the church] by your *prayers*, your *presence*, your *gifts*, your *service* and your *witness*?" Today's theme is the stewardship of *service*.

Stewardship is defined in the dictionary as *management*. A steward is a *manager*. To exercise *stewardship* means that we manage our money, our time, our gifts, graces and abilities so that God can be glorified, and to help people (and ourselves) discover, build and express Christian faith.

You might expect today's sermon emphasis to be on all of the things available for you to do, or in which you can be involved, here at Mason Church. You might expect that I will be doing a run-down of all of the jobs and ministry teams featured on the sign-up tables in the church foyer. Though I toyed with that idea, that is not what I intend to do. It would be easy to highlight all of the things that need to be done and must be accomplished here, leaving you with a profound sense of obligation to rush out to the tables and sign your name to as many activities as you might scrape time together to do. Begging, however, is something with which I am not comfortable – be it in any of the areas of stewardship emphasis: your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service or your witness. People are moved to do these things for the church not out of a sense of obligation, but of desire.

I have heard many sermons on today's text that have left me feeling like I do not *do* enough. An unscholarly exposition of this James passage provides a wonderful opportunity to lay a guilt trip on a congregation, using it as a proof text to coerce people into doing tasks and taking positions within the church. It provides all of the earmarks necessary to say things like, "You have faith. I have *works*. You believe. I *do* something. You fold your hands in prayer. I put mine to the *plow*."

The imagery in today's text is quite colorful. Here's my paraphrase: "Suppose a person knocks on your door and is naked and hungry. You open the door and see their nakedness and their sunken stomach under their bone-outlined skin structure, and you say, 'God bless you. Go get warm. And get

some food.’ And then you shut the door. What good did that do?” Well, in the first place, if someone comes to your front door without a stitch of clothes on the police will likely be called! Naked? Well!

I will never forget coming home from school one afternoon in the early fifties, meeting my mother and two little sisters in our North Carolina parsonage living room, noticing that the bathroom door was closed and the water running, knew Dad was not there, and hearing Mom say, “A homeless man is in there taking a bath. He just got out of prison. He’s going to have dinner with us this evening.” Mom! Are those things supposed to happen? These days? After all, it’s the 1950s! Well, Mom was a trusting woman. Would I do that kind of thing today? I’d have to think about it. Not Mom. Her knee-jerk reaction was to help anyone, anytime, anyplace. She was a servant. [Helen Carnahan’s home opened to a “homeless pastor” in 2007.]

I remember my son and daughter’s respective graduation days from my alma mater, Taylor University, a Christian college in Indiana. Something that I didn’t receive was given them when they crossed the stage. Along with a diploma the university president hands each graduate a towel. It’s a tradition now. Taylor graduates have always been challenged to be servants. Now they are given a towel to remind them. Both of my older children still have their towels on display alongside their diplomas from 1989 and 1995. And they both, for God’s sake, exemplify servanthood. It’s a joy to watch them. *You* know servants, too. Not the kind of servants who would do something out of fear because they *have* to. Not being a servant for wages because they *must*. But being a servant out of *love*, because they can do *nothing less*. It is

this kind of servanthood that Jesus was exhibiting in John 13 when He was demonstrating that *servanthood* was a primary factor in leadership.

Somewhere in the midst of *works* and *servicing* we can get lost from ourselves if our *service* is not from the *heart*. In the words of the late Brent Curtis in his book The Sacred Romance coauthored with John Eldredge, “In the end, it doesn’t matter how well we have performed or what we have accomplished – a life without heart is not worth living. For out of this wellspring of our soul flows all true caring and all meaningful work, all real worship and sacrifice. Our faith, hope, and love issue from this fount, as well.” [Page 3]

The writers suggest “busyness substitutes for meaning, efficiency substitutes for creativity, and functional relationships substitute for love. In our outer life we live from *ought* (I ought to do this) and management substitutes for mystery. There are three steps to a happy marriage, five ways to improve your portfolio, and seven habits for success. (And, yes, “5 Practices of Fruitful Congregations” is in the mix.)

“There *is* a spiritual dimension to this external world in our desire to do good works, but *communion* with God is replaced by *activity* for God. There is little time in this outer world for deep questions. Given the right plan, everything in life can be managed...except your heart.

“The inner life, the story of our heart, is the life of the deep places within us, our passions and dreams, our fears and our deepest wounds. It is the unseen life, the mystery within – what [Frederick] Buechner calls our ‘shimmering

self.’ It cannot be managed like a corporation. The heart does not respond to principles and programs; it seeks not efficiency, but passion.” [Page 6]

In last week’s sermon I said, “...our heart, our *passion*, can rarely be hidden. Jesus said, “Where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.” If our treasure is in *things*, our heart will be drawn to the collection of *things* that, unfortunately, can be “corrupted by moths and rust or can be stolen by thieves.” At the end of life, *things* go to someone or somewhere else. [Last week’s statement: “Funeral shrouds do not need pockets.”]

When *passion* drives our *service* it takes on a new dimension of meaning. Then *servicing* comes from the passion of the heart and not a job to be completed for cash or kudos, points or pay.

Passion for the *church* is not the basis of stewardship. It is when we feel a longing for a deeper and more meaningful *relationship with God* that our passion for God’s church will naturally follow. Our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness will naturally flow from a heart with a *passion* to know God, and to invite others to know God, too.

Many of us will remember having, or being, *best friends* when we were growing up. It felt good to have, or be, a *best friend*. In my younger years, and well into my later adulthood, I felt that I had hundreds of friends. Then I realized I could count my best friends on one hand...with my fingers closed. There is only one Friend who understands me completely. I don’t even need to use words to communicate with this Friend. That Friend is God.

God created me, and sustains me, in the passion of God's own love. God put Jesus on the earth to bring us a new and deeper life, and to be a perfect example of unconditional love. It is a demonstration of the *Sacred Romance*. I ask you not to try to theologically dissect the gospel, but to receive it as the gift it was intended to be. God loves us with a passion. No one understands us better.

I would love to tell you what I think of Jesus  
Since I found in Him a friend so strong and true;  
I would tell you how He changed my life completely,  
He did something that no other friend could do.

Every day He comes to me with new assurance,  
More and more I understand His words of love;  
But I'll never know just why He came to save me,  
Till some day I see His blessed face above.

No one ever cared for me like Jesus,  
There's no other friend so kind as He;  
No one else could take the sin and darkness from me,  
O how much He cared for me.

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