

Moving Toward “Works”

James 2:15-16 (NRSV)

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to her, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about her physical needs, what good is it?

Recently, at my job, I reviewed a case wherein a teenager in this county was forced to do unspeakable things for money – not to purchase an iPhone, but to purchase food. At the time, the teen had been abandoned by his parents and was trying to survive. Adults, sensing the desperation, preyed on the teen.

The facts are haunting, but to me the saddest part of this story is pondering how this could happen – in Gloucester County, in 2016. Every adult involved in this child’s life knew he was at risk – the school, Social Services, the Courts, the Division of Child Protection and Permanency, and yet ...

Every safety network we, as a society, have in place failed this child. We, you and I, failed this child. How can this happen? And, more important, what can we do?

This Lent, I am going to do more than send “thoughts and prayers” for those in need. I am going to ask God for wisdom and discernment to help the most vulnerable members of this community and our world. I don’t know where this will lead, but I am hoping to hear a “loud, large voice” guiding me into action.

Here, I am, Lord. Is it I? Amen.

*Staci Scheetz
Pitman United Methodist Church*

“Little Arms” for Lent

Little arms crossed in prayer (pretzels!) were first made by the Roman Christians hundreds of years ago out of flour, salt, and water as a food to be eaten on fast days. They were called *bracellae* (little arms). Germans called them *brezeln*, from which the word *pretzel* has come.

In Luxembourg, the fourth Sunday of Lent is **Pretzel Sunday** (Bretzelsonnidig). On this day, friends and sweethearts exchange elaborately decorated pretzels.



Butterflies and the Holy Spirit

Mark 10:27 (NIV)

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

During one of our church services, Pastor Jim Bolton said that butterflies are like the Holy Spirit. I agree with him. Mark, my husband, and I raise butterflies every summer. It’s amazing to watch a caterpillar start as a pinhead-sized egg, grow into a caterpillar an inch-and-a-half long, then to a chrysalis, and finally, into a beautiful butterfly. I know there is a God. Butterflies connect me to God, they give me comfort, and they remind me that God is present and with me.

One butterfly wing is mirrored to the other. God made us in His image. *Then God said, “Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26).*

A butterfly cannot fly with one wing. We need God in our lives to soar.

Butterfly wings are held together with a body in between them. We need Jesus to be connected to God.

I have seen butterflies able to fly with one wing halfway gone. At times, all of us experience damage: it could be physical, mental, or spiritual, but with God we can get through it.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26).

My aunt passed away 15 months after her husband. The week she passed, we noticed two tiger swallowtail butterflies frolicking in one of our butterfly bushes. They made us think of Aunt Moy and Uncle Donnie being free and happy in heaven. I don’t know if it was the same two butterflies, but there were two butterflies in our yard the rest of the summer, and they gave us comfort.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3).

To me, butterflies are like the Holy Spirit. They remind me that God loves me, and that He sent His Son to die for my sins.

Heavenly Father, thank you for butterflies. They are a reminder that you are present in our lives. They are also a reminder to trust in you because you have our best interest in mind even when we can’t see it.

Kim Tortella

Pitman United Methodist Church

To Be Like Jesus

Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV)

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God...humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.

Hebrews 5:7-9 (NIV)

... Jesus offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and ... became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Puzzling, isn't it, to read of our Lord and Savior having to learn obedience? We are accustomed to thinking about us obeying Him. But He came to live like us, and learning obedience was part of it. In small matters, we brush off our disobedience as insignificant. When it comes to bigger questions, we sometimes see the assignment before us as impossible, certain that obedience to this particular task will be the end of us in some way. It may be. God in Christ is always calling us to new life, to be new people, more like Jesus. That can't happen without releasing old habits or sins that are imprisoning us.

Nearly everyone has struggled with a key in a lock at some time. Either the key won't go in, it won't turn, or even turning, it doesn't seem to engage the lock effectively. There is, however, a key that is completely dependable, and that is the Key of Obedience. This key, when inserted into the lock of appropriate authority, always unlocks the gate of freedom. The lock or the gate or both usually seem impossible to deal with, or at least totally unappealing. "I don't want to!" The gate looks like it leads to prison, trouble, or entrapment of some kind. Only determination to "do what God says" allows one to grit the teeth and turn the key. Suddenly, completely unexpectedly, the gate swings open onto a vista of something never seen before – an unknown or unimagined joy, or an answer to a heretofore unanswerable question. I have found this to be quite a surprising experience.

Grown and married for years, I answered a direct question from my mother with a lie. It seemed better at the moment than risking her disapproval. Instead, I felt God's disapproval. Unhappily, I confessed my wrong, knowing Mother would be mad or disgusted or both. Rather, she took it in stride. For me, however, it was one of the times when I recognized the necessity of obeying God's Word, and the freedom attached to obedience. We read that Jesus endured the shame of the cross "for the joy set before him" (Hebrews 12:2). As we read and ponder scripture during this Lenten season, let us note the calls to obey. Jesus has faced these very issues and is ready to help us do the will of the Father, as He, Himself, chose to do.

Father, help us to learn to live a life of obedience. Guide us as we seek the freedom that obedience to you brings. Amen.

*Jane Fish Harre
Gibbstown*

Touched By an Angel

Hebrews 13:2 (NKJV)

Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.

A few years ago there was a TV program called *Touched by an Angel*. It was about God sending angels to bring a message or help someone with a particular problem.

A few months ago I was getting ready the night before a surgical procedure. As I lay in bed, I sensed God telling me that I was to give a message to someone for Him. I wrestled with delivering any message to anyone and possibly speaking to the wrong person, thus making a fool of myself and God. It was then that the Lord told me that I was to deliver the message to a person named Cathy. Well, that surprised me, and I resolved that if I ran into someone named Cathy, I would share His message with her.

I awoke early the next morning prepared for my surgery. My wife Sherry and I made that early morning trip to Cooper Hospital and waited to be checked into my room. My name was called, and I was led into my room for preoperative preparation. Upon entering my room, I encountered a nurse who said, "I will be your nurse for the day. My name is Cathy." Well, I did a double-take and could not speak because I had a lump in my throat. After a little while, I got settled and told her that I had a message from God for her. I barely got it out when I saw tears in her eyes. She remarked that I was her little angel and thanked me.

They say turn-about is fair play as I was about to see.

My surgery did not go well, and it had to be stopped as a complication developed. I was to lie in bed for four hours and not move. After four hours, Cathy said I was able to go to the bathroom. During my bathroom visit I started to bleed profusely at the site of the incision. Quickly, Cathy grabbed me and took charge, calling two other nurses to help her as she applied pressure to the surgical site, therefore preventing me from bleeding out. So as she thought and called me her angel, it turned out that she was my angel, too! Her quick action saved this little angel boy from a life-threatening situation. Praise God for angels!

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your love and for enabling and trusting us to minister in your name so others will know you still speak and care for us today.

*Al Zappola
Emmanuel/St. Paul's United Methodist Churches, Penns Grove*

A Cheerful Giver

2 Corinthians 9:7 (KJV)

Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.

A classmate from college gave me a gift which I cherish. It is in my study and I look at it every day. It is a hand sculpted bear made out of hardened ash from the Mount St. Helens eruption. It took a significant investment of time, and careful use of the person's hands to complete this labor of love for me. As I was looking at the bear this morning, it reminded me of a story following the Mount St. Helens eruption, which I feel led to share with you.

On May 18, 1980, Mount St. Helens erupted, killing at least five people, destroying land and wildlife. Its ashes traveled literally all over the world and could be seen from space. Following the eruption, one church needed a great deal of cleaning up. Ash could be found in the parking lot and all over the inside of the church facility because some windows were left open. A woman met the pastor in the hallway of the church and asked, "Why don't we get the high school and college kids to come in and help poor Fred (the custodian) clean this place up? Let's get them involved." The pastor said, "Great idea. Would you be willing to get some women together to cook lunch for us?" The woman paused and then stammered for words finally saying, "Well, actually, we have plans for tomorrow and I don't know when we'll be back."

Why is it people are willing to volunteer someone else for a job needing to be done? It's so easy to get into the mindset that serving God is a burden or an inconvenience. The fact of the matter is, regardless if it is giving of money or time or service, God loves a cheerful giver. God loves those who are willing to make sacrifices for Him.

It is natural to think of the verse above as referring to monetary giving. However, God wants His people to cheerfully volunteer in service to Him. God wants His people to cheerfully worship Him. God has so mercifully allowed us to have so many blessings, blessings that we often take for granted. Consider that God has lovingly given us our time, our energy, our abilities, our talents, our homes, our cars, our families, all that we have, and He has given it all to us cheerfully!

Lent reminds us to examine our commitment to Christ and His Church. Are we willing to be actively involved in serving Christ through our local church, or do we find it easier to volunteer others?

Thought: As we cheerfully give of ourselves to the Lord, He is blessed by our efforts, and those around us will also be blessed!

Almighty God, as we journey through this holy season of Lent, may we examine our level of commitment to you. May the Holy Spirit remind us of our calling to serve you in any way we can. May you be glorified through our efforts and may we serve you joyfully. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Rev. Dr. James Bolton
Pitman United Methodist Church

All God's Gifts Are Good Gifts

Psalm 34:8 (NIV)

Taste and see that the LORD is good.

It is an understatement to say that life can be difficult. Some of our difficulties may be simple annoyances, but others may be heart-wrenching ordeals that we feel will crush us. Jesus does warn us that we will have trouble in this life so we should not be taken by surprise. As Christians, however, we sometimes have difficulty coming to terms with life's trials, but perhaps an even greater difficulty may be explaining to nonbelievers why we have them. What should we say to a nonbeliever who assesses our situation and asks, "If God is good, how could He allow something like this to happen to you?"

Well, we say, "Regardless of how things look, I serve a good God – a God who is the standard of ultimate goodness. And if God has allowed this, I will assume it is for my good. It may not be good by my standards, I may not like it, I may not understand it, and I may not be sure how I will get through it, but I trust God and therefore, I will accept it."

The scripture is full of hopeful assurances related to trials. James 1:17 reminds us that "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." Psalm 84:11 assures us by saying, "For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is righteous."

Our problem is that we don't always know what is good for us, but God does. James MacDonald, pastor of Harvest Bible Church in Chicago, defines trials as "painful circumstances allowed by God to change our conduct and character." 1 Peter 1:7 supports this idea regarding trials: "These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

From God's perspective, our faith is of greater significance than our earthly happiness. God also reassures us in the words of Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

One last thing we need to keep in mind and convey to our nonbelieving friends when questioned regarding God's goodness is God's unlimited love for us. We can accept the struggles that we face because we know that He allowed His own Son to endure unspeakable suffering for our sake. And Jesus, fully God and fully man, knowing what He had to suffer, did not shrink from the ordeal to ensure our place in heaven.

A final promise from the scripture to hold onto through trials: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13 NKJV).

Dear Heavenly Father, in the midst of trials, help me to trust your goodness and love for me. May my faith be refined so that your light and glory shines through me. Amen.

*Sylvia Gruber
Zion Community Church*

Washing Out the Dross

Hebrews 12:1-2a (NIV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Last summer I went panning for gold. No, I wasn't trying to strike it rich, but it was part of the tour experience my wife and I were on in Alaska. We were at Gold Dredge 8, just north of Fairbanks. We didn't have to kneel down by a river's edge and try to find gold. Rather, we sat on benches alongside troughs filled with water. We were each given a pan, like a tin pie pan, and a small bag of dirt. The idea was to pour the dirt in the pan, then using the water in the trough, swirl it around to get the dirt out and find gold in the bottom of the pan. I was having trouble getting the dirt out; after all, I didn't want to lose any gold that perchance might be in there. Seeing I was struggling, a worker told me I had to tilt the edge of the pan more toward the water. I did so with a little improvement, but not enough. Then the worker said to tilt it more. I was afraid of washing out everything in the pan, but finally I tilted it much more and the dirt washed out, leaving behind a number of tiny gold nuggets clinging to the bottom of the pan.

That experience reminds me of how we often fear to let go of what we have for the promise of something better. We cling to our old and comfortable ways and habits. We are afraid to let go of what we have, afraid we will lose what is important to us. But that fear keeps us from experiencing what is so much better for us.

The writer of the book of Hebrews says: "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." Among other things, Lent should be a time of introspection and self-examination to see if there is anything that is entangling and hindering our walk with the Lord. Are there things we need to let go of, things that need to be washed out of our life? Are there areas where we need forgiveness and cleansing? Are there things that are holding us down or holding us back? Then "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." Tilt the pan of your life more fully into the Water of Life, so that God can wash out whatever is a hindrance to His grace being revealed in your life. We can only do that by surrendering to the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit. His work, as the hymn writer put it, is "thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine."*

And when we have done that, then we can "run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24) I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Pastor Gary Turk, Retired

* From the hymn: How Firm a Foundation, 1787

dross – unwanted material that is removed from a mineral (such as gold) to make it better; impurity