

**Sermon for February 19, 2017 – “Stone Soup”**  
**Westwood First Presbyterian Church**  
**Pastor Jeff Colarossi**

Texts: 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

Once upon a time, in a land much like ours, there were some weary travelers who came to a village with nothing but a cooking pot. They found a place to camp near some water, filled up their pot, and put it over a fire. Then they took a large stone and put it in the pot as it simmered. A villager saw this, became curious, and asked what they were cooking. They explained that they were making a wonderful dish called stone soup that they would be happy to share with the village. They just needed a few small things to make it extra flavorful. The villager decides to donate a few carrots and adds them to the pot. Another villager sees them and contributes some potatoes... This goes on until there's a wonderful, nourishing soup to be enjoyed by all. This folk tale shows illustrates what the concept of gleaning can look like in a community. By each contributing some, there's always enough for all. In the story, the villagers were sort of tricked into contributing, but they did contribute on their own accord because they believed that the end result would be something great. And it was. But it wouldn't have been if they'd decided to keep their doors locked and never speak to the strangers among them.

In the story, the stone was the base for the soup with the villagers building upon that. Similarly, our foundation is Jesus Christ. Something of which Paul reminds the young church in Corinth (and us) in today's epistle reading and we must choose carefully how we build on it both individually and as a community. We are the Body of Christ. We belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to God. All parts of us belong to God. All of our hurt. All of our joy. All of our imperfections. If we believe that God's Spirit dwells within us, by extension that means that God's Spirit dwells in others, too whether we like it or not. This should matter to us. This should change us. It should lead us to being perfect as our **“heavenly Father is perfect.”** Perhaps not an ethical or moral perfection, but perfection in the Hebrew sense of the word **“tamim (tah-meem),”** which means “wholeness.” To be perfect is to serve God wholeheartedly and to be single-minded in our devotion to God. That's what we're striving for in this lifelong journey with Jesus. If we're striving for wholeness in God, and I think we should be, then our lives as disciples will show it.

Our love's not one of vengeful retaliation as we see in this morning's gospel reading. Instead, our love is one that extends even to our enemies because that's what God calls us to. Which I would call, for lack of a better term, actions of faith. We are to be, as Jesus says earlier in His Sermon on the Mount, salt and light to the world. The faith that we claim to have within our hearts and minds is to be acted out with our bodies.

Are we God's dwelling place? If so, how does anyone know? What do I mean? Well, let me put it this way...The Christian life isn't passive. Quite the contrary, it's active and intentional. It means loving others, seeing God in others because God sets no limits or restrictions on loving. If we stay inside the boundaries of where we feel comfortable then our homes, church, and community will stay pretty much the same. Things will never change. **We** will never change. Some may be thinking “he says that like it's a bad thing...” Well, on some level it is! It's as you've heard me say before – faith is not a spectator sport. Our Christian life by definition, is not one marked by passivity. Instead, it requires that we step out in faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to follow Jesus. That is, to do whatever it is Jesus calls us to.

Following Jesus means that we get off the couch (or out of the pew) and actually do something. I imagine that most of us have heard the expression “let go and let God.” And we should. We need to be still and know that God is God. Still, there’s things we’re to do as well. We’re presented with commandments. Last week Jesus said that He hadn’t come to abolish the law or the prophets. He said, and I quote: **“Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven...“But whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven”**. Whoever **does** them. Whoever **teaches** them. So, it seems to me that these commandments ought to be more of a call to action than an emotional feeling we’re able to contrive. Besides, how can someone be commanded to love? How can one be commanded to feel something? Could it be that Jesus had something else in mind? Could it be that maybe we’ve gotten it wrong all these years?

What’s sad is there are so many people who claim to have faith, who claim to be Christian, and yet do nothing. But it’s all right there in the scripture, we’re told what we need to do. God’s Word calls us to faith in action. We’re called to be Jesus’ hands and feet in this broken world. We’re to love, love, love. That’s what it all comes down to.

The entire “Law” can be summed up in two simple commandments. Love God. Love others. That’s it. That’s our calling. Now, what that looks like will be different for each of us, but the call is the same. And the call is one that requires action.

Hey, here’s an idea...How might things be different if we actually started to love the way Jesus does? What would the world look like? What would our church look like? Faith is not a noun. Faith is a verb; it’s an action word, not a thing you have. Our faith should move us toward Jesus to respond to His calling to each and every one of us: come follow me. And as He does...So do we. In John’s gospel, Jesus tells His disciples that, **“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love Me; and those who love Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love them and reveal Myself to them.”** Let me say it one final time. Faith, the Christian life, requires action. I don’t care how old or how young you are. Let me read you what might be a familiar passage from James’ letter: **“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? “Suppose, a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. “If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” “But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” “Show me your faith without deeds...“And I will show you my faith by what I do.”**

Okay, fine, James, but what (we ask) must we do? How might we be able to live out our faith more intentionally? How can we be more deliberate as we follow Jesus? There were a few suggestions in the passage I just read. Did you catch them; about taking care of peoples physical needs? Need more? There’s plenty to do around the church, just ask Building and Grounds. Oh, and the Deacons are a little short-handed, they could use always use a little help. Can you pick up the telephone and call people? Can you sign a card that says thinking about you? Would you be able to get a handle on your discomfort to spend a few minutes with someone who feels forgotten? Would you be willing to share an experience of grief or loss and possibly comfort someone in a similar situation? I’ll say it again, faith is not a spectator sport. We’re working on ways to help people get involved without signing their lives away. In other words, we’re looking to take away many of the objections. But, it seems to me that if you **really** want to help you’ll find a way. Make no mistake, this isn’t about trying to earn salvation or God’s favor. Nope, salvation’s a gift that cannot be earned. Ever...It’s a gift!

If you were to say that according to Paul, we're justified by grace through faith and that this was central to our reformed theology, you'd be right. But, if you were to then say what James is saying contradicts Paul, well, I'd have to say that I disagree. And I'll tell you why. James was contrasting two types of **faith**...One genuine – the other false. Paul was contrasting two ways of **salvation**...One offered by God – the other by human beings. They weren't opposing one another, they were fighting against different enemies of the gospel. See, here's the thing, Jesus calls us to radical hospitality for ourselves and for others. God loved us first so that we'd know what love is. And, because of our love of God, we're able to love ourselves and others. Jesus constantly challenges us with this. Jesus calls His disciples, us, to a higher standard. God's love is seen in the world when communities, especially churches, are concerned with things like compassion, justice, and care of everyone, especially the most vulnerable. And they're all around us. Have you ever walked into a roomful of people, where you know maybe one or two of them? Or have you ever been the new person at school, at work, at church? You look around and everyone else seems to know each other and you just stand there feeling awkward. It's hard to know where to begin. It's easier to talk with the people we already know. It's always safer to love the person who already loves us. But Jesus doesn't call us to the easy or safe life. Sorry, but Jesus calls us to discipleship. And that means not just mingling with the other, but **embracing** them as well, accepting them for who they are. That means noticing the awkward person in the corner and inviting him or her into our conversations. That means praying for those who wish us ill and respecting the dignity of every human being.

Frederick Buechner once wrote: "Jesus says we are to love our enemies and pray for them..." "Meaning love – not in an emotional sense – but in the sense of willing their good...the sense in which we love ourselves. "You see where they're vulnerable. "You see where they're scared. "Seeing what is hateful about them, you may catch a glimpse also of where the hatefulness comes from. "Seeing the hurt they cause you, you see the hurt they cause themselves. "You're still light-years away from loving them, to be sure but at least you see how they are human even as you are human and that is at least a step in the right direction." Good stuff – right? So let me ask. How would it feel to be seen like that? How would it feel to be loved like that? We ought to know because each of us are! When we come to know, understand and fully embrace that it's life changing! It changes us in the sense that we're reminded that we're all part of something greater, that God's love for us is beyond our imagining and that same God invites us to share what we have for the soup. To throw it in with what others bring whether we think it's fitting or not. This is what it means to be God's dwelling place in the world, to have our hearts changed, to have the things we do for one another make the soup what it is. Something that people want to share in, a place where people will want to gather. We want to know what we have to do to grow our church. Here's where we start...

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.