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Mark 7:24-37
Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm 146
James 2:1-10,14-17

September 8, 2024
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

⁴*Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!"*

I love this verse. I know there are times in my life when I have been afraid, or when I have failed, or when life has thrown me some unwanted curve balls and strike outs. There are times that I didn't know how I would make it one more day. But, verses like the one from Isaiah gave me hope.

I don't know what I would have done over the years without the church, without my faith. It has been my foundation when everything else felt as though it was crumbling. God was and is my ever-present source of direction. And, that has made a difference in my life that matters.

Each Sunday, I step into this pulpit with the prayer that your faith will be that same source of hope for you. The reminder that God loves you immeasurably. The invitation that you will always have a home where the doors are open wide welcoming you in. I hope you have felt it.

Because here is the beauty of that welcome... if you come in often enough, you start to feel a change happening within your heart. A change that brings you into a deeper connection with who you are as a child of God.

But that deeper connection raises an important question...what does change within in our Christian context look like in real time?

Well, let me suggest that one of the most critical parts of our faith formation happens *after* those moments of welcome. It's the response that is created within us when we have opened our hearts to trust God a little more than we did the day before. When we let joy fill our hearts and hope sustain our days.

It's the moment of transformation when what we say we believe changes who we want to be. When what we have been given through our faith begins to flow out of us as an abundant gift to others. We can't help but to give what we have received.

Our reading from James describes this transformation with these powerful words...¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

It's a verse that might sound a bit harsh to some but in my mind it holds the depth of Christian possibility. The possibility that our transformation is not just a transformation of inner grace but a transformation of outward grace.

What we believe changes who we want to be.

To James' point, faith that remains isolated to our inner wellbeing comes to a dead end. Sure, faith has enlivened our lives, it has healed us, given us hope, forgiven us, loved us. And that is so good. But James pushes us a little more and asks how much greater would these gifts of faith become if they were shared?

Today, we begin a new season at Grace. It's the season of the year that isn't marked by any particular liturgical time. We aren't celebrating any particular observance. Instead, it's a season that is marked by our time together as a community. When we come together to find ways to share our inner grace in tangible outward expressions of faith.

You have already heard about a few of these outward expressions this morning. And I hope you also heard the foundational joy that characterizes each act of service. It's a foundational joy that people feel when they commit to growing their spiritual lives, their inner grace. It's a foundational joy that grows as people commit to sharing God's love with others, their outward grace.

And so, this fall marks an opportunity for you to work on your foundation of joy. It's an invitation to not only cultivate inner grace within your heart but to boldly cultivate a practice of outward grace.

Let what you believe change who you want to be.

I want to leave you with an important charge this morning. I want you to consider a time in your life when someone's outer grace showed you something about God's love. When that grace was offered at a time you needed to be held and cared for. When faith became a place of trust and hope and strength and courage.

And you knew this thing called faith was worth believing in.

Now, think about how you might offer your own outer grace to someone else. Because I am here to tell you...it will change lives. You might be surprised at how it changes yours.

Amen.