

Walk the Walk

James 3: 13-18

October 28, 2018

Rev. John Allen

This is the third and final sermon in my series Holy Home. Over the past few weeks I hope that I have been able to help you think about how you can strengthen your faith not just here at church on Sunday morning, but throughout your week at home.

As I said the first week, you have to practice. I never got very good at the violin, because even though I went to my lessons each week, I didn't practice. Faith is not something that we can build one hour a week. It needs to be a part of our everyday life, through regular practices of prayer and meditation.

Last week, I explained the power of stories. We are the practitioners of a faith that lives in stories. We tell the old stories of our faith, and the stories of this church, and even the stories of our individual

families because knowing stories about our past helps us to see our place in the future, it makes us more resilient, and reminds us of who we are, who God is, and who we are to God.

Finally this week, one more important way to grow your faith outside of church. Walk the walk.

From the moment we are born, we learn how to live in this world by imitating adults. Smile at an infant, and she might smile back. I have seen some 2 year olds that seem to know how to operate an iPhone, swiping and pinching. Why? Because they have seen their parents do it so many times.

I heard a father share a story once about their child who was trying to get past a couple of other kids at the playground. Finally, in frustration, the child yelled, “move idiot!”

The dad instantly recognized the phrase, which had come out of his own mouth when they were stuck in traffic the day before.

We learn, by watching, and by imitating other people.

The behaviors children observe in trusted adults are the things that they learn most deeply and directly. That old saying, “do as I say, not as I do.” It just doesn’t work that way.

But it is not just as simple as doing the things that we want our children to do. Children do not just imitate us. They learn from the very atmosphere in which they live.

That is because the sum total of our actions reveals our values. We show who we are, and what we believe, by the way that we act.

A child psychologist named Dorothy Law Nolte wrote a poem called “Children Learn What They Live.” It is long, but the lines follow a similar pattern, and I want to just read you a few.

Children Learn What They Live

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.

If children live with jealousy, they learn to feel envy.

If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.

If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.

If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.

Children learn what they live.

Our scripture reading this morning puts it a little more bluntly. “Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But whoever is wise and understanding, demonstrate that by your good life.”

I have had a number of chances recently to hear from Middle and High School aged youth both in this church and in the wider community.

One of my biggest concerns about our kids today is that, on the whole, they seem to have way over-invested their sense of self worth in their academic and athletic achievement.

At my last church, I spoke with a kid who had a nearly full-blown panic attack over a midterm exam that didn't go well. He was stringing together consequences, a bad grade this term, and I won't get into that school, and if I don't get into that school I'll never get this job, and if I don't get this job, I'll never... I'll never... I'll never...

Children learn what they live, and it has seemed to me that one thing our kids are learning is that they are not worth anything unless they earn it and they are not good enough until they prove it.

I am pretty confident that no one ever said that to that kid. But he picked it up.

Maybe we could add a line to the poem. If children live with impossible standards, they learn to feel inadequate.

And I struggle, wondering what we as a community might be doing that is teaching our kids this twisted value. How are we creating an atmosphere that is influencing our kids to see themselves this way.

And I think it is an issue of urgent importance to figure out how we can live our lives in such a way that encourages our kids to work hard, and to reach for their goals, without convincing them that every failure is a catastrophe, and that their future hangs in the balance every time they take a test.

We tell the youth who come to this church that God loves them no matter what. We tell them to rest. To take care of themselves. We teach them to pray, and to breath deeply.

But when they walk out the door and back into their lives, we need, all of us, to be living and acting in a way that reinforces their inherent worth.

Because that is what we believe. That everyone is a beloved child of God. That we are all worthy of love. That we are all valuable. That is the talk we talk. But we all need to walk the walk.

It might be as simple as telling them a story about our own screw-ups, I often tell youth that I got a D in High School Chemistry, I nearly failed Latin in college, and I got rejected from Harvard Divinity School almost as soon as I applied. All of those things hurt. They were all hard. But none of them ruined my life. Let's remind our kids that no one is perfect, and they don't have to be either.

It might be as simple as giving them space to feel the disappointment rather than rushing into problem-solving mode. Tell them about

something that you are proud of them for. Let's live in a way that shows our kids they could never flunk their way out of our love.

It's just one example among many possible others. The most important way to grow and shape faith in our homes, is to live out the values we espouse in small ways every day.

But this whole walking the walk thing. It is not just for the benefit of the people who look up to us. This is how we grow our own faith as well.

The things we do everyday. The ways we live and behave. They have an impact on us too. When we live out of values, we reinforce them to ourselves.

We make habits.

Then those habits make us.

So how do you develop your faith when you are not at church? Walk the walk.

One of my professors in Seminary defined worship as “practice for life.” That is to say, what we do here at church is a rehearsal for how we want to live the rest of our life.

The passing of the peace is not just a way to see our friends and greet newcomers, it is us practicing seeing every new face as someone who is our neighbor and our friend.

Communion is not just about remembering the last supper, it is about preparing to approach the gifts of God with gratitude, not just at this table, but at any table.

Prayer is not just about lifting up our petitions and celebrations to God, it is about learning to see that God’s holiness infuses everything.

And the way we can best grow that faith, is to live what we practice here, in the world that waits for us when we depart.

The very best way to practice our faith day after day is to see everyone as worthy and precious by virtue of their birth.

To live without anxiety about what is beyond our control, but with confidence and trust in God.

To speak our gratitude openly.

To share what we have with no hope of being repaid.

To admit our own faults and flaws without shame.

To ask for help when we need it without guilt.

To seek forgiveness, and offer it in return.

To make choices based on what we hope for, rather than based on what we fear.

To do the right thing even when we think no one is watching.

To honor our commitments and vows to one another.

To serve our community, and seek the wellbeing of others as much as we seek our own wellbeing.

Everyone of us has a thousand opportunities each day to grow our faith simply by living it.

Everyone of us has a thousand opportunities a day to teach someone what Christianity is all about, based on the way we act.

And none of us will rise to all thousand opportunities. Not a chance.

But let's each start with one.

What is one way today that you could live the faith that we practice in here, out there.

One thing that you could tell someone.

One grudge you are ready to let go.

One debt that it is time to forgive.

One thing you need, that it is time to ask for.

One chance you have been waiting to take.

One hope you have long since surrendered.

One dream you have been afraid to let yourself dream.

Let's start with one thing. To start walking the walk. Living the faith we proclaim.

Do that, and your faith will grow.

Do that, and you will teach this faith without uttering a word.