

“SCHOOL DAYS! SCHOOL DAYS!
IV – FIELD TRIP PERMISSION SLIPS
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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James 1:22-25

Matthew 28:18b-20

Today we come to the last installment of this September sermon series called “School Days! School Days!” during which we’ve looked at things we use at school as metaphors for the things of the spiritual life. You might remember that we started out with name tags and talked about identity and how important it is for everyone to know they are valued and respected. The second week through notebooks we looked at prayer, and our vital connection through prayer with God. Last week, the object was books, and we focused on the priceless gift we’ve been given by God in the Holy Bible. And today, the object is “field trip permission slips.”

Now, I don’t know about you, but the words “field trip” still make me happy, to this day. Field trips in school were always fun for many reasons, not the least of which was it got you out of the classroom for a day! I remember some great field trips over the years, but a few that stand out for me are a trip that we took to the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia I think when I was in elementary school – I remember walking through the chambers of that gigantic heart. Anybody else remember that?

I also remember two different field trips we took in the eighth grade at Elkton (then) Junior High. One day they took the entire eighth grade out of the school and walked us down North Street, over the bridge, and into the Elk Theatre (yes, we actually had a real movie theatre in town right where the Elkton town offices are now) where we sat and watched the entire four hour showing of “Gone with the Wind.” I suspect we were studying the Civil War at the time.

In the spring of that same school year, the entire eighth grade from Elkton Junior High got on a train here in Elkton (yes, we actually had a train station here then, right across from the bowling alley!) and we went up to New York City for the day!

Those were some great trips, and I couldn’t help but think of those field trips when I happened to be driving down to Turkey Point the other day and passed by a sign for a place called North Bay. I’m sure many of you have heard of it, and I have seen a lot about North Bay in the past few weeks, because a couple of our sixth-grade youth have gone there this week and last. And someone who grew up in this church worked there – I’m not sure if he’s still there anymore.

At any rate, I had read about North Bay and how all sixth graders in the county go there for a week, but I didn't know much more than that, so I reached out to Joe Buckley to learn more. And this is some of what he told me about it.

“North Bay is an outdoor educational weeklong experience for all sixth graders in Cecil County. It incorporates science, environmental education and character education. They weave together science concepts into life experiences. They talk about niches in science and how certain species have a role to play in our environment and how each person is unique in their own niche in the world and how important it is for them to know themselves and their strengths and how to maximize them. They also look at invasive species in our environment and how we too have people and things that are invasive in our lives, and how important it is to recognize the contamination they bring to us personally. And then, filters. Our bay has wonderful filters (like oysters and crabs) that clean our bay and help combat bad things in the water and make it healthy. The youth are reminded that there are people in our lives to serve as filters for us and help us to become better people.”

As Joe said, “North Bay does a real nice job of weaving together life in the bay and how we live our lives.”

I was so glad I asked Joe about that because as soon as I read today's Epistle lesson from the Book of James, I thought that what they do at North Bay is exactly what the writer of James asks us to do – and that is integrate learning and doing. You heard the reading, where the writer says, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only.”

You know, all of the things we've talked about in this series – name tags, notebooks and books – or self-awareness, prayer and scripture – are all critically important parts of our faith. But, once we have those, we're called to do something with them. We're called to integrate them into our lives and then be doers - living out our faith in the world – thus, field trips, if you will - adventures into the world to do what Christ would have us do.

Pastor James Moore, in an article entitled “The Sin of Just Talking a Good Game” encourages us to live out our faith when he writes this: “The truths of our religion are most impressive, most inspiring, most influential when they are wrapped up in living persons. God knows that. That's why he sent Jesus – so we could see his truth wrapped up in a person. The most effective argument for Christianity is a real Christian. The supreme argument for our holy faith is a holy life. The truth is that people out there on the street are not that interested in our theologies, or our liturgies, or our vestments. The people out there are pragmatists. They want to know, ‘Does this thing work?’ They are tremendously interested in that.” (James W. Moore, *Yes Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*, “The Sin of Just Talking a Good Games,” p. 26.

Friends, they will know this thing works – this thing called faith, this thing called God, this thing called Jesus – when they see it through us, when they see that not only do we believe, not only do we intentionally seek to grow in faith, but they see us living it!

In today's Gospel lesson, we pretty much hear Jesus saying the same thing – “Go and do! Go and make disciples, go and baptize, go, do something in my name.”

It's the call on each of our lives as his followers – to go and do, to integrate what we know and who we love into the lives we live.

Friends, the Lord calls each of us to go into the world with our faith, and live lives that make a difference and show love and care for others. We're not meant to simply grow in faith for our own sake, we're meant to live in faith as well for the sake of those whom God loves.

When you hear the phrase “God's call on your life” it might seem intimidating. You might equate it to Jesus calling the disciples to drop everything and follow him, and you can't imagine making that giant leap of faith. But not everyone is called to stop everything and drop everything and change your life completely to follow Jesus. Some are, but most are called to share His love with the world in small, ordinary ways.

Goodness knows the world today needs love and kindness more than ever. In our society where people call each other terrible names and tweet terrible things and suspect each other of all sorts of things, a kind word from one of us is, literally, a balm in Gilead. Just a kind word.

Holding a door, offering to help carry packages, offering to sit in church with a person here for the first time, a kind comment to someone who looks down, a promise of a prayer for someone hurting – small things that mean the world to people. It means you've noticed them, just as Jesus noticed people – and in this sometimes harsh and cold world, in this day and age – people are hungry for kindness and caring, and frankly, sometimes they're surprised by it.

You know, not long ago, I went into a store and needed a lot of stuff, so that, by the time I got to the check-out counter my cart was full. As I waited for the woman in front of me to be checked out, a man came up behind me with two things in his hand to buy. I turned to him and said, “Why don't you go ahead of me?” You would have thought I had given him a hundred dollars! He was so grateful. It was just around dinner time and if he thanked me once, he thanked me three times for that little act of grace. You see, small things, small acts of kindness, mean a lot. It's what Jesus did all the time, and what he calls us to do.

More than that, he also asks us to keep an eye out for and care for the vulnerable. He was especially good at that – seeing those who needed something special, and caring for them. That asks a little more of us than just a small act of kindness.

I read again this week a story from long ago of a woman named Donna who was a mentor at the local elementary school. One year, she mentored a little six year old boy named John. So once a week she would go to the school and work with him. She was there every week, sure and steady, and they became pretty close.

Sometime during that year they were together, one night, during the night, Donna's husband died in his sleep. When it came time for his funeral, someone arranged to get little John there. After the funeral ended, there was a reception time where Donna stood to greet people, and as she did, guess who was by her side? Her six-year-old buddy John, standing there holding her hand so she wouldn't be alone.

He stood with her the whole time, and even when someone tried to get him to rest and sit down and enjoy a plate of food, he wouldn't, because he didn't want her to be there by herself. And the one who told their story said that everyone there that day saw that tremendous act of love by that little boy for the woman who had tremendous love and care for him. Many were reduced to tears by the mutual love those two shared with each other. (James W. Moore, *There's a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, "Excitement in God," p. 37.)

Donna lived out her faith in her commitment to that precious child, and that precious child learned how to love in return. Like that proverbial pebble thrown in the lake, the ripple effects of sharing our faith and love go on forever.

So, sometimes we can live out our faith in small ways, sometimes in seeing and noticing and loving and caring for those who are vulnerable, and finally, I want to suggest one more way (although there are surely many more) and that is, sometimes we show our faith and love in sacrificial ways – ways that call us to go out of our way and give of ourselves, even when it's not convenient, or asks much of us.

Bishop Robert Schnase, in his book *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, recalls a rainy night during his seminary years when he was coming home and walking up the stairwell in his dorm, and as he did he ran into one of his seminary professors. This man was one of the most distinguished and respected professors on campus, and, he added, "one of the most respected theologians of his generation." So he was very surprised to run into him in the dorm. As I said, it was a rainy night, the professor had on his suit and tie as usual, but was wearing a dripping wet raincoat

as well, and in his arms, he carried several bags of groceries. Robert offered to help, and took a few of the bags and heard the story about them as they continued up the stairs.

It seems that a wife of one of the graduate students had become seriously ill and was undergoing cancer treatments. This professor had taken the time to visit the couple and offered to help in any way he could. So after he finished teaching his classes, once a week, he would go and buy their groceries. He'd been doing it for weeks.

Robert Schnase, now a bishop, was incredibly moved by this man and has since said this: "Nothing I learned from him in the courses he taught had as much personal impact on me as finding him in that staircase on a cold, rainy night." (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, p. 104)

Sometimes, friends, going into the world and living our faith as Christ's disciples asks much of us – asks us to sacrifice, to give more than we think we can, to be uncomfortable, to forget about ourselves in favor of someone else. Oh, but when we do, love comes down, and lives are lifted, and the love of Christ touches people in ways we may never understand.

"Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only," James says to us. How easy it is for us to simply seek to grow in faith quietly and privately – and that's not a bad thing, for sure. But Christ asks more of us than that – he asks us to take our faith and go into the world in His name.

Can you do that? Will you do that? Our world is desperate to know the love of God that has been poured out in Jesus Christ. People are desperate to know they matter, and that somebody cares and that there's always hope. We know that all of that comes through Christ, so we are called to be the bearers of that Good News to others.

As we end this sermon series, we remember that we have all the tools we need for this journey of faith – our identity in Christ, prayer, the Holy Bible, the constant example of Christ. Every Sunday we're reminded of those things – we have everything we need. Now, like those sixth graders at North Bay, we need to integrate them into our lives and go into the world and go and share them with others.

I want to finish with one more brief story. Surely most of you have heard of the great Albert Schweitzer – theologian, physician, organist, magnificent, holy man. He spent much of his life studying the Word, and writing about it. His works are still read at seminaries. What you may not know is that at one point in his amazing career Schweitzer decided to leave his life of privilege and prestige in

Germany in order to become a full-time missionary in the Belgian Congo. He did medical mission work there, in a hospital deep in the jungle. When asked, in an interview on BBC, why he had left his amazing life in Germany, he said this: “I have decided to make my life my argument.” (On-line, Day One, “Doers of the Word,” 9/2/18)

Friends, that’s what the writer of James, and Jesus, are calling us to do – make our lives an argument for the faith we possess, the faith we profess. So go out into the field of life, and be doers of the word. Live your faith in such a way that others will know the reality of the abounding love and amazing grace of Jesus, and come to know him too! May it be so.

Amen.