This week’s passage from James has a great deal that we should pay attention to if we want to know how Christians should live, or how the Church of Jesus Christ ought to behave. He talks about not playing favorites based on human prejudices and distinctions, in this case, between the rich and the poor. I could preach a whole sermon on that, just as it relates to the current presidential campaigns. But, I am definitely not going there. I’m perfectly willing to share my political views privately with anyone who is curious, but the only advice I think it is appropriate to give you from the pulpit about voting is – do it! Try to be informed on the issues, try to sort out the truth from all the political rhetoric, and vote.

Instead, I want to focus on the last line of our passage; “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” And I want to talk about how that relates to our beliefs as United Methodists. Like me, some of you have been life-long Methodists. Others of you are brand new to attending a United Methodist Church. But whether it’s a review or first-time information, I think it’s valuable to once in a while think about what we believe as United Methodists and how that relates to our lives, both individually and collectively.

So, I’m going to spend the next several Sundays doing a series of sermons about some of our United Methodist beliefs and practices. It might seem odd to start with a Bible passage about the need for works, because one of the most basic Methodist beliefs is that we are saved not by our works, but by our faith in Jesus Christ. If you would give me only one word to sum up the theology of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, the word I would use is grace. I’ll go into more detail about Wesley’s views on grace in the coming weeks, but he firmly believed we are saved by grace and not by our works. But from the very beginning, Methodists have believed that the right and faithful response to having been saved by God’s grace is to put our faith into action, to have our faith be evident in what we DO.

And so I want us to think about a list of words: Prayers, Presence, Gifts, Service and Witness. If you have been a United Methodist very long, the list probably sounds familiar. If the last word seems a little less familiar than the first four, it’s because it was added to the list just four years ago. When someone joins a United Methodist Church they are supposed to be asked the question - “As a member of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?”
Not only is the new member who is joining the church asked to make that promise, but the rest of the congregation is asked to renew their promise to do so, as well. The way I see it, it’s a promise to put our faith into action, to not have a “dead” faith but to commit ourselves to works that are evidence of a sincere and vital faith. That specific list; Prayers, Presence, Gifts, Service, and Witness may be uniquely United Methodist, but I think those words need to be put into practice by anyone who is a part of any church, and by anyone who desires to be a follower of Jesus Christ. So let’s look at those words-

The first one should be the easiest, because anyone can do it – Pray. We promise to participate in the ministry of the church through our prayers. You probably all know stories, (maybe it’s even your own story) of people who know that the only way they made it through a dark or difficult time was because of prayer, either the strength they found through their own prayers or through knowing that others were praying for them. We pray because prayer is powerful, and because we need to pray. Even Jesus knew that he could not go long without talking to God, without finding the strength and guidance that came from his heavenly Father. We are asked as United Methodists to pray. It doesn’t matter if you can’t get to church every Sunday or how busy you might be, you can support the church by praying; pray for the ministry of this church, and the broader church of Jesus Christ. Pray for people you know who need your prayers, whether they are people in this church or outside this church. Prayer is so important not only because it connects us to God, but because it connects us to one another, it makes us care more deeply about one another.

The second promise you make as a United Methodist is to support the ministry of the church by your Presence. You do that by being here, by showing up. We ask members to commit to acting like worship and other activities of the church are important, to be involved in the life of the church. Each member of the church, whether they have been here for 30 years and hold positions of leadership or are new and barely involved, needs to know that they matter, they make a difference. The body is not complete without all its parts, we need all our members to be involved, to be present. Each one needs to offer their presence to the church not only because of what it does for church, but also for what it does for them. It is important to be a part of the body of Christ, to worship, to be connected to others, to care for others and to know that others care for you. Beyond being present at worship and other church activities, I think there is another way to support the ministry of the church with your presence, and that is to be present with others who need to know that the church cares. We are called to be the hands and feet and eyes and ears and heart of Jesus in this time and place, to be the presence of Christ in the lives of those that are hurting or in need.
The third way we support the ministry of the church is through our Gifts. There’s no question that the time and talent people offer to the church are valuable gifts, but they fall under the next word – service. So when we talk about gifts in this context, what we primarily mean is our gifts of money. There is no question we are to give to God. The Bible is very clear about that. And the Bible is also pretty clear that God deserves more than our leftovers. Scriptures speak of giving God our “First Fruits”. That meant that people were expected to give the first 10% of what they grew or earned to God, to give to God out of their gratitude before anything else. Sometimes we United Methodists have been a little reluctant to talk a lot about giving, about what is expected. We’ve made people think it is OK to give God the leftovers rather than the first fruits. We don’t always talk in terms of sacrificial giving, but the Bible is pretty clear that that is what God desires.

Years ago I read a story, I think written by a United Methodist Bishop who had been visiting churches in Africa. The Bishop told of seeing a boy and his father out trying to plow their ground. They didn’t have an Ox, so the father was laboring to pull the plow. When the Bishop mentioned it to a pastor, the pastor told the rest of the story. The farmer had had an Ox, but he wanted so much to be able to give something to God and to the church, that he had sold it and given the money to the church. When the Bishop made some comment praising the man’s dedication and generosity, the pastor replied that the man did not see his gift as something extraordinary; in fact the man expressed his regret that he wasn’t able to give more than just one ox. Talk about sacrificial giving! It sure made me think about what I give! United Methodists ask that members commit themselves to giving to the church to support mission and ministry that makes a difference in the world, that enables the church to live out God’s love and grace in this time and place.

When we talk about the fourth word, Service, we mean the use of our time and talents within the church or on behalf of the church. Service could be teaching Sunday School or singing in choir, or baking cookies. It could be something as intensive as going to a foreign country on a mission trip or as mundane and unglamorous as cleaning the bathrooms. If you aren’t able to do some of those things any more, it could be something as simple as calling folks to let them know someone is thinking about them, or sending a card.

The final word that has been added to the list is Witness. We ask members to support the ministry of the church through their witness, to live in such a way that you represent your church, that you represent Jesus Christ, in a positive and faithful way. It could be sharing your faith with others, or inviting others to come to church with you. Maybe it is as simple as saying we ask you to live in such a way that someone watching you would be able to say, “Those Fort Des Moines United Methodists are good, Christ-like people.”
So, when we become a member of a United Methodist Church we promise to faithfully participate in its ministries by our Prayers, our Presence, our Gifts, our Service, and our Witness. The church is less than it could be when its members do not take those promises seriously. But I realize that this morning I'm doing what is sometimes known as “preaching to the choir”. Most of the people who need to be reminded of those membership promises are not here. So I want to close with some encouragement to those of you that take those promises seriously and strive to live them day after day, year after year. Sometimes it can get discouraging, it can start to feel like what we are doing isn’t that important, and no one really cares, no one really notices. I'd like to share the thoughts of Nicole Johnson, a Christian author and motivational speaker. This comes from a speech she gave that I listened to on You Tube. She is speaking primarily as a woman and as a mom, but I think what she says applies to all who work within the church year after year and wonder if anyone notices or cares about all they do. Here are Nicole Johnson’s words:

**Invisible Woman**
by Nicole Johnson

It started to happen – gradually. I would walk into a room and say something, and no one would notice. I would say, “Turn the TV down please, and nothing would happen. So I would get louder, “Turn the TV down, please!” Finally I would have to go over and turn the TV down myself. And then I started to notice it elsewhere. My husband and I had been at a party for about three hours and I was ready to go. I looked over and he was talking to a friend from work, and I walked over and - he kept right on talking. He didn’t even turn toward me. That’s when I started to put it together. He can’t see me. I’m invisible. I’m invisible. Then I started to notice it more and more. I would walk my son to school, and his teacher would say, “Jake, who’s that with you?” And my son would say, “Nobody.” Granted, he’s just five, but, Nobody?

One night a group of us gathered, and we were celebrating the return of a friend from England. Janice had just taken this fabulous trip, and she was going on and on about the hotel she stayed in, and I was sitting there looking around at the other women at the table. I’d put my makeup on in the car on the way there, I had on an old dress because it was the only thing clean, and I had my unwashed hair pulled up in a banana clip and I was feeling pretty darned pathetic. And then Janice turned to me, and she said, “I brought you this.” It was a book on the great cathedrals of Europe. I didn’t understand. And then I read her inscription. She wrote, “With admiration for the greatness of what you are building when no one sees.”
You can’t name the names of the people who built the great cathedrals. Over and over again looking at these mammoth works, you scan down to find the names and it says builder unknown, unknown, unknown. They completed things, not knowing that anyone would notice. There’s a story about one of the builders who was carving a tiny bird inside a beam that would be covered over by a roof. And someone came up to him and said, “Why are you spending so much time on something no one will ever see?” And it is reported that the builder replied, “Because God sees.”

They trusted that God saw everything. They gave their whole lives for a work, a mammoth work, they would never see finished. They showed up, day after day. Some of these cathedrals took over a hundred years to build. That was more than one working man’s lifetime. Day after day. And they made personal sacrifices for no credit. Showing up at a job they would never see finished for a building their name would never be on. One writer even goes so far as to say, “No great cathedrals will ever be built again, because so few people are willing to sacrifice to that degree.

I closed the book, and it was as if I heard God say, “I see you. You are not invisible to me. No sacrifice is too small for me to notice. I see every cup cake baked, every sequin sewn on, and I smile over every one. I see every tear of disappointment when things don’t go the way you want them to go. But remember, you are building a great cathedral. It will not be finished in your lifetime, and sadly, you will never get to live there. But if you build it well, I will.”

At times, my invisibility has felt like an affliction to me. But it is not a disease that is erasing my life. It is the cure for the disease of self-centeredness. It is the antidote to my own pride. It’s OK that they don’t see. It’s OK that they don’t know. I don’t want my son to tell the friend he’s bringing home from college, “You’re not going to believe what my mom does, she gets up at four in the morning and she bakes pies and hand bastes the turkey and she presses all the linens.” Even if I do all those things, I don’t want him to say that. I want him to want to come home. And secondly, I want him to say to his friend, “You’re going to love it there.”

It’s OK that they don’t see. We don’t work for them. We work for him. We sacrifice for him. They will never see. Not if we do it right. Not if we do it well. Lets pray that our work will stand as a monument to an even greater God.
To add to what Nicole Johnson said, I would add; We don’t work for the other folks in the church. We’re not self-employed. We work for God. And nothing we do is unimportant or invisible to God. He hears and heeds each prayer. Even if it seems like no one else noticed that you were in church, God saw. God knew. He knew what you gave up to be there. God sees each gift you give. God knows what each gift cost you. He knows how much of your heart was attached to the gift.

God sees each act of love and service, no matter how small. He saw when you taught those wild kids for years, he saw when you baked those pies or pounded those nails, or set up those tables. He heard you singing in the choir, he heard the words of encouragement you spoke to someone who was hurting. God saw when you were down on the floor at church, scrubbing between the tiles or around the baseboards. At times when we feel invisible, like what we do doesn’t really matter, remember that God sees, God knows. And each Prayer, each time you are Present, each Gift, each act of Service, each faithful day of Witness, they matter. They matter to the church. They matter to God.