

One of the things that I do during the week is visit medical centers with my therapy dog, Otto. For context, a therapy dog is one who has been trained to provide comfort to others. Therapy dogs are often invited to places like hospitals and medical centers to bring joy to patients, staff, and visitors. My therapy dog (Otto) & I have been screened and accepted as a therapy team by the Presbyterian and Lovelace medical systems. One of the places that we like to visit on Tuesdays is the Lovelace Heart Hospital, which cares for patients with heart and vascular disease.

Because we are a registered therapy team and have completed all the volunteer onboarding requirements of the hospital, including regular vaccinations and health checkups, we are permitted to visit the ICU which consists of patients who have recently had various heart surgeries. As to be expected, most of the patients don't interact much with the "human leash holders" such as myself, instead choosing to focus on the comfort and the novelty of being visited by the dogs. However, during one of our recent visits, a recovering patient who happened to be reading His Bible when we knocked on his door to visit, engaged in a conversation with me and my colleagues. And this conversation was the inspiration for my message today.

The man told us that he was taking advantage of his hospital stay to work on Living his Faith. He went on to explain how the last two verses of the passage I shared from Paul's letter to the Ephesians really got him thinking about the importance of Living his Faith, having been Saved by Grace for Good Works. It was not a new concept to him, but what really resonated after his recent heart surgery is that he hadn't been Saved by Grace just to take up space, but to do Good Works. He figured that since he was still alive after all that he had gone through, God must still have work for him to do! Therefore, he concluded that Living his Faith must be really important.

As I mentioned before, it is rather unusual for a patient to engage in conversation like this with the human leash holder during a pet therapy visit. My encounter with him was profound and intriguing. While our interaction was brief, his comments gave me quite a bit to think about.

Let's back up a bit and discuss some of the words used in this passage so that we are all on the same page. First off, What is Grace? Grace is the unmerited favor of God lavished upon us by His mercy and kindness. It is not something we can earn, instead it is a free gift from God just because He loves us.

What then is Faith? Faith is our trust in God. The trust that He has done, is doing, and will do what He said He would. John Wesley described means of grace (works of piety and works of mercy), as being the ways that God works in us to strengthen our faith. I like to think of it this way: Grace is what God does. Faith is what we do. Living our Faith means that we demonstrate our trust in God by the way we live our life.

And this is where Good Works come into play. What types of Good Works was Paul talking about in the passage that I read? Many of these Good Works involve agape love. Jesus explained in Matthew 22:37-39 that we are to Love God & Love Others when He said, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The type of love described by Jesus in this passage is a love that is of and from God, whose very nature is love itself. Agape love is not based on a feeling, nor is it not conditional. Instead, it is an active love demonstrated by what one does. It is a decision to intentionally and joyfully put the welfare of others above our own. Jesus gave the parable of the Good Samaritan as an example of sacrifice for the sake of others, even for those who may care nothing at all for us.

I am sure you remember the story. The Samaritan took time to help when he came across a man who had been left for dead by bandits. He could have walked by like

the Levite and Jewish priest had done, but he didn't. And it's not like he had a first aid kit handy to pull out of the trunk of his car; everything he used to help the man would have come from his own supplies. He made bandages from his own clothing. He put him on the back of his own donkey. He transported him to an inn for more medical attention, paying for care and lodging out of his own pocket. All of this for a stranger and with no expectation of being reimbursed.

That's agape love and it gives us a blueprint for the "good works" that we were created to do by living our faith. The New Interpreter's Bible One Volume Commentary explains that "good works flow naturally from God's choosing to save us". We live our faith not only by loving God, but also by loving our neighbors through acts of compassion, generosity, and selflessness.

Who are the neighbors that in living our faith that we are commanded to love? I would suggest that neighbors are basically everybody we come in contact with. For the gentleman in the Heart Hospital who was working on living his faith, it meant the doctors and nursing staff, visitors like Otto & I, housekeeping, other patients, etc. For you it might mean your friends and relatives, your church family, people at the grocery store, people in the community that you serve during mission projects, etc.

So let's go back to the man who got me thinking about all of this. I met him in the ICU at the Heart Hospital as he was recovering in a hospital bed after a fairly serious surgery. How on earth could this man, who at the time wasn't even strong enough to get out of bed without assistance, possibly live his faith through agape love? He clearly wasn't strong enough to perform "big works" of love like the good Samaritan, or work at a food pantry, or even help an elderly neighbor with her grocery shopping.

Fortunately, this man wasn't focused on all the things that he couldn't do. He focused on what was in his control. He came into contact with a lot of folks while he was hospitalized, and recognized the situation as a target-rich environment for practicing agape love! He could smile at visitors like us, wish the workers who

brought his meals a good day, say thank you to the staff member who changed his bed linens, be kind to the nurses who woke him up in the middle of the night to take his vitals, offer a compliment to the surgeon and staff who had worked hard in the operating room to save his life.

On the surface, those may seem like little things, but together they add up to big things. What a wonderful example of the Good Works that this man was able to perform as he re-committed his life to living his faith while recovering from surgery. By making an effort to make others' days a bit brighter, rather than focusing on himself, he was practicing agape love. I concluded that if he could find practical ways to live his faith while lying in an ICU hospital bed, so can we. Each and every one of us have been saved by God's grace, for good works, which we can do by living our faith. No matter how dire our circumstances may be, we can take steps to love our neighbors.

I want to leave you with one more thought. In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus is recorded as saying: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

This passage reminds us that we aren't simply the recipients of Christ's light, we are to let it actively shine in our lives. While the passage talked about a lamp, I will modernize it a bit by making it about a light bulb. With this in mind, I want each of you to close your eyes for a moment and imagine that you are a light bulb. Got it? Okay.

You are a light bulb. Your job is to shine. How do you do it? How do you shine? You can open your eyes now. What did you imagine? Do any of you think if you try really hard on your own that you will be able to shine? I don't think it works that way. I've got a whole bunch of light bulbs on a shelf in my garage just sitting in the dark. I don't think any of them will spontaneously light up on their own. The only

way that I know for a light bulb to shine is to be connected to some type of power source.

Similarly, I believe that the only way for us to shine is to be closely connected to our power source. When we are connected to God and have a relationship with Jesus, His light pours forth through us in ways that shine into the world around us. It's not our light that shines, it's His. And THAT is what makes it possible to live our faith through acts of agape love. By shining brightly for others to see, no matter what our circumstances may be, we give glory to God. That's exactly what the man in the hospital bed was doing. He was living his faith by shining brightly to everyone he came in contact with, giving glory to God through simple but beautiful acts of agape love.

I challenge each of you to do the same this week. We have been saved by grace to do good works. So as you go forth, I challenge you to stay closely connected to God, and let the light of Jesus shine through your lives to all you meet.

AMEN