

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**James 4:13-15, “Open”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/15/2022**

This is our second week in a series on our core values:

God centered. Open. Courageous. Loving.

When these values are fully present in our life together,  
we will have everything we need for the challenges we face.

We began last week with a discussion about being God centered.

One thing I pulled out from the comments people made  
was that being God centered isn't about talking about God  
everywhere you go, or doing religious things like attending church.

When we value being God centered it means  
that we approach every area of our lives with an awareness  
of God's presence and activity.

In the pie chart of our life, there aren't any slices  
that are reserved only for us,  
and we don't compartmentalize God  
into just one or two areas.

God is the hub around which our lives unfold.

When it comes to understanding what we truly value as individuals  
and as the church, the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:21 are especially helpful.  
Jesus says that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

According to Jesus, we can tell what we value by looking at where we place  
our resources, our time, our creative energies, and our relationships.

What is it that you truly value? What is it that we value as a congregation?  
Where are our resources, time, creativity, and relationships focused?

When answering that question for the church,  
it might be tempting to approach core values  
by assigning them a particular area of church life:  
Worship is God Centered  
Small groups and Bible studies are Open  
Community Dinner and Wednesday Breakfast are Courageous  
Deacons are Loving

There, we did it! We're living out all the values!  
Well...not quite.

What a community truly values can be seen everywhere...all the time. [REPEAT]

That means we are asking God to help us embody our core values such that:  
our worship becomes God Centered – Open – Courageous – Loving  
our building and grounds oversight is  
God Centered – Open – Courageous – Loving  
our small groups become God Centered – Open – Courageous – Loving  
our community outreach is God Centered – Open – Courageous – Loving  
our children and youth ministries are  
God Centered – Open – Courageous – Loving  
our stewardship and finances are  
God Centered – Open – Courageous – Loving  
our elder and deacon boards are  
God Centered – Open – Courageous – Loving  
and (perhaps most importantly) our life in other spheres that we don't  
think of as being "churchy" are also  
God Centered – Open – Courageous – Loving

See the difference?

Because of this, these values can function as a check  
to see if what we are doing is in line with our vision.

Living by our core values doesn't mean we're perfect.  
It means we have a clear sense of who we are, and what we're about.  
That makes a difference even when you get things wrong.



Now I want us to shift to today's scripture passage from the book of James which will give us insight into what it means to value openness.

James is famous for being practical, focused, and no-nonsense.

I've always loved this book because it gets to the point.

In this passage, James takes aim at people who are overly controlling about their life plans.

He starts out with a hypothetical which likely comes from his own experience:

**v. 13 "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.'"**

It's important we realize that James isn't describing plans to do evil.

This is just an ordinary plan for the next year.

James also isn't critiquing the plan for being insufficiently religious in its focus.

He's not saying the plan should involve more charity or evangelism.

The critique is focused on how *certain and closed-off* the plan is.

In v. 14 James names his concern about firm plans a year from now:

**"14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."**

When legendary boxers Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield

were preparing to square off in a title bout,

reporters were grilling Tyson to see if he was worried about Holyfield's plans for the fight.

Iron Mike grew irritated and famously replied,

"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

(Tyson learned how true that statement was when Evander punched him in the mouth, and he lost the fight.)

We all have big plans for our lives until the Cascadia subduction zone slips and the west coast is hit with a magnitude 9 earthquake.

Okay ... so does that mean planning is bad?

Here is James' answer to the that in v. 15:

**“Instead, you ought to say,  
‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’”**

Planning is not the problem. Planning that isn't God centered and isn't open to other possibilities is the problem.

Knowing that we are creatures, knowing that God has called us to live in the way of Christ, knowing that unpredictable things happen all the time, we would be fools to place unwavering trust any future plan. Such confidence cuts out God's leading in our lives and closes us off from other possibilities.

Wisdom is found in planning that is both God centered and open.

“If it is the Lord’s will” opens our hearts, minds, plans,  
and relationships up to the possibility that  
things could be different than we expect.

So fear not, planning Presbyterians. Your planning is not wrong.

Trusting in our plans as sources of safety and security  
that ignore God's activity in our lives is wrong.

So let us infuse our planning with the values of being God centered and open.

Now, sometimes we need to be closed.

Closed can mean safe. Contained. Consistent.

For an individual or a community, being closed sometimes  
allows for internal processes  
without interference from the outside.

But we cannot be a healthy, growing community if we value being closed.

We value being open because it is the way of life.

In her book *Who Do We Choose to Be?*,  
Margaret Wheatly looks to the world of science  
to understand the importance of being open.  
She writes, “A living system has permeable boundaries  
and sense-making capacities. It is an open system,  
capable of exchanging energy with its environment  
rather than using up a finite amount.  
If it opens to its environment, it takes in information, a form of energy.  
It notices changes and disturbances that it then processes,  
free to choose its response.”

Margaret Wheatly follows this up with a contrasting statement:  
“However, if a living system closes itself off,  
there is no possibility for change and growth.  
Closed systems have no potential for life’s adaptive capacity.  
They work like machines, passive travelers on the arrow of time,  
deteriorating and losing capacity, predetermined to waste away.”

This insight has tremendous implications for our life as a church.  
If we live into our value of being open,  
we will have permeable boundaries  
with the surrounding community which will enable us  
to exchange energy, ideas, and understanding.

Having permeable boundaries means keeping a sense of distinction,  
but also remaining open to learning from and with others.

The breakthroughs of the Mac Youth Collective,  
collaborating to support the Afghan family with Reedwood Friends Church,  
and our long history of partnering with groups like YCAP  
and other local missions are great examples of this.

There are places in our life where we have demonstrated considerable openness.  
We need to keep encouraging those and let this value  
of God centered openness become infused  
throughout our entire congregational culture.

Last week the Yamhill Community Care Organization  
hosted a group called the Service Integration Team in our building.  
About 20 people from non-profits, schools, churches,  
and social service government offices came together.  
Each month one person shares a profile of the group they represent  
and the work they are doing in the community.  
Each month participants are invited to bring  
especially difficult cases of people who don't quite fit  
their organization's ability to help,  
and the group will brainstorm other services or approaches  
that might be able to help.

If nobody can find a solution, the group also has a small amount  
of grant money available to help directly if they choose.  
This is what a living community looks like.

This group is meeting in our church building every month!

Having them in our building is one thing, but what about learning from them?  
What about participating in the conversation?  
When we are open, we let go of our pride  
and look eagerly outside our own group for possibilities,  
relationships, and resources.

When we are open we are ready to experiment and try something out,  
even when we aren't sure what the result will be.

When we are open, we keep God in mind when we make our plans,  
ready to be surprised, empowered, and challenged when the  
Spirit rearranges the way we thought things would be.