

Aug 30 Engaged Faith

James 1:17-27

James challenges his listeners to put into practice what they have heard. A little later he says in 2:14 “Claiming to have faith can’t save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, ‘Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal?’ What good is it if you don’t actually give them what their body needs? In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn’t result in faithful activity.”

From the time of James to now we struggle between faith and action. Some want the church to concentrate on the things of faith; Bible study, worship, prayer and meditation. Others say our focus must be on service to others, particularly the down and out. We understand that it must be a blend. To only focus on our faith development means we end up ignoring Jesus’ call to love our neighbor and care for those in need. To only focus on helping makes the church one more club trying to do good in their community. Unfortunately, what I see as a pastor is what one person calls moral Alzheimer’s. We, most Sundays, listen to the challenge to serve given to us by Jesus, we reflect on what this means for our lives, we might even feel challenged to do something but we then go away and do nothing. It is as if we have never heard the words. We hear and forget to go to work. An engaged faith is one where there is a balance between listening and doing. We have to be more than passive listeners but also follow through and act. Too often people only see in James a call to action. Luther challenged James’ theology as “works righteousness” believing James was saying we earn our way into heaven by what we do.

To help us see the balance in James and to understand that he is about more than actions, we need to hear those places that tell us that words are important: We are called to be quick to listen. Listening is hard work. We don’t always like the words we hear. Sometimes those words remind us of our failings. Other times, like in James, they point to our lives and ask what are you doing for others? We want to forget the challenges. We want to sit comfortably in our pew and say, “It is well with my soul.”

Listening, really listening takes commitment and focus. It requires an openness and an expectation that the person speaking has something to tell us.

Keeping with the importance of words we are told to be slow to speak. This doesn't mean that we should never say anything, but only say things after there has been careful reflection. When you talk to communication experts they will tell you that most of us quit listening to someone after the first idea they share. This is because we immediately begin to frame our response. We can hardly wait for them to stop talking so we can tell them our view. Careful listening means hearing a person out, thinking about all they said, asking whether or not we even need to reply, except to encourage them, and, if so, to do it carefully and thoughtfully. But James words remind us that at times we do need to speak. Sometimes words are essential.

A pastor writes about his first church. Five pastors shared hospital calling. One asked me to call on the sister of one of his members. The room door was closed so he knocked, and a frail voice answered, "Come in." In the dim light he saw a tiny woman, very thin, lying on her back. Her eyes were closed. He told her he was a pastor, and stepped closer.

"I don't think much of preachers! The church is full of hypocrites!"

He was taken aback, but tried not to appear too shocked. Remembering his clinical pastoral training he said "Sounds like you are angry about something. Can you tell me?"

She could and she did! She said her family was always trying to tell her how to live, but "they never so much as shared a sandwich with me! They are a bunch of Christian hypocrites!" About the third time she said, "They never so much as shared a sandwich with me," he asked, "Do you remember a particular incident with a sandwich?"

During the Depression she had no job but her sister had married a rich guy. "They lived in a big fancy house." She asked her sister if she could do housework, gardening, or sewing. "The only pay I wanted was just a sandwich. My sister said she would give me a sandwich if I'd just sit down and talk. I said, "Oh no you don't! From the

time we were little you were always trying to run my life. Before my last cancer surgery, I called her and told her I didn't want her at my funeral! I hate her! She's just a Christian hypocrite!"

Then she said, "The last time I had surgery, I got saved."

The expression on the pastor's face must have given him away because she said, "Don't you believe me?" He didn't say what he was thinking but said, "Being a Christian is more than words. It makes a difference in our relationships with other people."

She scowled. "You had better leave now. You have made me ill. Go away!"

The next time he visited in the hospital the head nurse stopped him as he was going down the hall. She told him that the woman did not want him or any clergy person to visit. He felt sick. For days he couldn't get the woman out of his mind. He kept thinking, "I'm supposed to bring people to Christ, not drive them away!" He went through a time of crisis and he wondered if he should have just listened instead of speaking.

A few weeks later the head nurse stopped him again to tell him the woman had died. The day before she died she asked to see her sister, told her she was sorry for all those years of bitterness and asked her sister to forgive her. She died peacefully.

Being a Christian is more than words but sometimes the words are essential.

Finally James says we are to be slow to grow angry but anger is sometimes necessary. Too often we hear this as saying anger is never good because James says an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. I disagree. Anger can be a good and helpful thing at times. It helps us to have that engaged faith James was talking about. A hot headed response because someone hurt your feelings isn't what I am talking about. I am talking about that slow smoldering anger that grows inside of you until it compels you to action. You can no longer sit by and see injustice happening.

This is the kind of anger Jesus had. He was at the temple and saw the money changers and realized they were making huge profits at the expense of the poor. Finally

he couldn't stand it and his anger led him to action. He upended the tables and drove out the animals from the temple. Much of the time that slow anger at injustice bubbling up inside of you it is the force to change. Rosa Parks, when asked why she sat at the front of the bus, an action that led to the civil rights movement of the 60's said, "I was tired." She wasn't talking about the tired that comes from working all day and then having to stand at the back of the bus when there are seats in the front. No she was tired of the way she was treated as a second class citizen. So we need a slow anger to burn if we are to be not just hearers but doers of the word. That energy will keep us from having Moral Alzheimer's.

James says true devotion is to care for orphans and widows. These were the marginalized of his day. Are we listening for advice on what we can do to help the marginalized of our day? Are we taking in the words, being challenged by them, instead of just speaking about what others should do or justifying why we don't do anything ourselves? Are we allowing a fire to grow and burn within us that will challenge us to do something? Working to help the marginalized is hard to do. They often want the quick fix for their problem and we would just as soon give it to them for it makes our life easy. And yes, the bit of gas, the meal, the place to stay are sometimes necessary. But mostly we need to work on some of the systemic problems of the poor. We also have to admit that we cannot solve every issue. Sometimes we do not have the skills or resources but we can point people to those who can help. When we deal with things on this level we are often abused instead of thanked. The marginalized are so use to asking and receiving the quick fix that nothing else is seen as caring.

The marginalize want more from us than feeling their plight is too bad. They want us to be in solidarity with them. They want us to do something about it. They want our faith to be engaged helping with their very real needs not just the quick fixes. Careful listening and deliberate action both are important; both are needed if we are to follow the example of our Lord.