

Calvary United Methodist Church
Sunday, September 9, 2018

FAITH IS AN ACTION VERB

Rev. Dr. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

James 1:17-27

I'd love to spend some time with our kids and today is also Bible Sunday. That's an important day, so kids, come on up.

Behind you are some Bibles; we are going to give them out shortly. The Bible is a really interesting book. It has all these amazing stories. Now, I know that it has chapters full of so-and-so begot so-and-so begot so-and-so begot so-and-so...you can fall asleep, but there are some really crazy stories in there. Let me show you a story or two. It's kind of hard to read that, but you all know what a donkey looks like. Have you ever heard of a talking donkey? Never? Think you'd ever want to meet a talking donkey? You wouldn't believe in a talking donkey? Well, it's in the Bible, a donkey actually talked. I'll tell you the story, ok?

So, it was a time when the people of God, the children of Israel, as they call them, they were on their way from Egypt where they had been slaves, they were set free. It's kind of a long story, so I'll just kind of skim over that part, but they are making their way to the Promised Land. And God told a particular guy who was a prophet: I want you to go to the high mountain. I want you to bless these people and promise them God's best, my best, for them. And so he said ok, but along the way there was a king in the area who didn't like the children of Israel and he said: I'll pay you to curse them. He said: money, talks, nobody walks, what do you got? So the guy gave him a bunch of money and he went with his donkey up to this high mountain and as he went up to this high mountain the donkey saw the Angel of the Lord and the Angel of the Lord had this flaming sword and the donkey stopped, but the prophet, whose name was Balaam, he couldn't see it. So he got off the donkey and he took a stick and he whacked him, which wasn't very nice, was it? Beat the donkey. Got back on, the donkey went a little further. And the donkey saw the Angel of the Lord, right? He was really mad. And this time the donkey moved against the wall of the mountain path and hurt Balaam's food. He was really hopping mad and so he got his stick out and beat the donkey again. He got back on and as he did they saw the Angel of the Lord, right? And he got off and he beat the donkey once more and the donkey said: Look, I've been a really good donkey for you. I have never refused anything you've asked me to carry. I've even taken you anywhere you wanted to go. And can't you see this? And Balaam said: I can't believe you are so difficult! He didn't think the donkey was talking. And the donkey said: Look! The Angel of the Lord. And he said: Holy cow! And that's when the Angel of the Lord said: If you think you can go up there and curse those people, God's got another thing in mind for you. So you better go up there and bless them. And he did. Of course, the king wasn't too crazy about that. He probably had to give the money back, but Balaam blessed all the people.

Now, you can read this story. It's in the early part of the Bible. There's Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; it's in Numbers, the fourth book, around the 22nd chapter. And there are a lot of other really amazing stories in this book.

Now, you are going to say: What is the point of a talking donkey? Right? Can you think of why there would be a talking donkey in the Bible? Want me to give you a hint? Ok. Balaam wasn't listening and the donkey was. Sometimes we try to get ahead of God. We don't listen. But this book teaches us how to listen. So, that's the whole point of the story, but it's a wonderful story. Some days it works, some days it doesn't. Oh, well! Alright, there it is. There's the donkey. One of God's creatures.

So, we are going to give out some Bibles. You have Bibles at home too. And you can't really read them by yourself with a lot of understanding. I mean there certainly are places in the Bible that are just pretty clear, but you need a parent and Sunday School teacher and sometimes reading together in a group and this Bible opens itself to you. You know what you get to do? You get to hear God speak. Do you know God does speak to you? He does it every day. He says: You know I'm just crazy about you? I am just wild about you. And it's the truth. God is love.

I'm going to ask Ms. Kelley to come forward and we are going to present some Bibles and we are going to get our Sunday School teachers up here and thank them for being here today. And before you go, I'll give you one of these.

Sermon:

Mark 7:1-8

It's nice to have the choir. Thank you. And some instrumentation there too. Thank you. Would you join with me in a word of prayer?

So, Lord, thank you for the grace of this day. Thank you for guiding us in all that we do today, meeting us here in worship. Before we even gathered, you were here to welcome us. Thank you. So, I ask that you would guide us, that the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts may be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Human beings are actually made to live in community. We are not made to live in a solitary way. We are made to be together and human babies are, you know, the most helpless of creatures. A baby sea turtle, how many of you have been to Florida to watch the sea turtles hatch and they go immediately into the water. Or a newborn fawn will stand on its own legs within sometimes minutes or about an hour. Baby birds will grow up within just a few weeks and fly off like they have been doing that just from birth. But, a human baby requires a lot of care, a lot of training, years of socializing, to become a mature person. In fact, human beings grow all the days of our lives, we are always growing. And if you are not always growing, well, that's another problem.

Now, the Christian faith is likewise one where we need to live in community with one another

in the company of each other in order to grow in our faith, to become mature in faith and to share the fruit of our faith. It is difficult to be a solitary human being and it is difficult, nearly impossible to be a solitary Christian. We need one another.

There is a person of Proverbs that says that iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. I've often thought that's just an amazing and wonderful verse to ponder about our friendship, because it underscores the importance of persistence in friendship, that people can sharpen one another's skills and graces and affect them in positive ways through the years of friendships, through all the ins and outs that come with congruent relationships, which includes sometimes a truly constructive friend who cares being faithful, to be there, but also to offer a word that sometimes might be a sharp word, and they don't give up when the other person doesn't heed their advice.

Now, John Wesley was also very clear about community. He understood that people need to be in community and that this faith is a communal faith, so he said this: that the Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness. And you can see faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian maturity. That's how he understood it. So human life is about growing and it is about growing up, that we grow into this measure of a person who is able to love God and to love our neighbors the way that we were created to love. All that other stuff that gets in the way, our ego, our faults, our failures, our sometimes ignorance, our sins, they keep us from growing in the love of God and the love of neighbors.

So, if the point is to grow in maturity, it is to learn how to love the way God made us to love. And the kind of love that God has in mind isn't necessarily sentimental love or romantic love, but the kind of love that builds other people up, that sacrifices for other people, because it has to find its expression in very practical ways.

I'm finding it interesting and amazing that a lot of people believe that you don't really need God or the church in order to be a good moral person, that you can go it alone. I have no doubt that many have reached this conclusion because they have seen the hypocrisy of the church. They have seen the hypocrisy of Christians whose walk does not match their talk. They understand that and they say: We don't need that. And they have a right to say that, they really do. But, I strongly believe that through the grace and love of others you need that in order to grow to be the kind of Christian God asks us to be because when we need help from beyond ourselves that begins with our birth and carries us all the way until we leave this life and we need our Creator whom we come from because the divine nature is in us. And James says this, if you listen carefully as Jackie was reading and read very well that we have the divine nature in ourselves. This is something that comes from God.

Now, Pastor Jeff and I are going to spend some time on the Book of James because it is such a practical book. We'll do that through this month. And James is a very practical man. You can see this very easily from his letter. It's filled with short insights, practical everyday advice.

There was a poet from the last century, Edgar Guest, who actually captured the essence of James in just a few words. He said: I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day. I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell me the way. Well, that's James. Just a very practical advice. And through his particular focus, the Holy Spirit is instructing Christians of all times and places that the Christian faith is not one that just resides in your mind or you say with words, that it has to be translated into actions. Not simply practical, but lived out so that there's integrity to what you are saying and who you are and the Christian faith needs to be applied for it to be authentic and for James a truth faith is a working faith.

Now apparently that understanding was not clear to James' readers. They thought they could just talk about it and that was enough and that remains the case today in many many places, so James sharpens the focus by saying: Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, that if you are only a hearer you are deceiving yourself. So, he says you've got to have your talk match your walk or your walk match your talk.

Now, just before this, if you look in your Bible at verse 18, James says, he mentions the phrase the Word of Truth and that Word of Truth, the Word of God, is able to save our souls. And he's saying this can only be the case as God's Word is in you because it produces fruit, the fruit of good works. And remember Christian maturity looks like this: being able to love God and to love your neighbor the way you were created to love. That's how God created you. And when we're misshapen, when we make the wrong choices, find the wrong path, then we are not able to love in that way.

James has seen how the Christians in the churches that he served fell far short of maturity. They let their ego have control. They let their anger get out of control. They were complacent about not addressing issues that really did need to be addressed in their day. They heard the counsel of scripture, the teachings of Jesus but never applied them. He likens them to people who will look in the mirror but don't really see themselves as they are, that the person who looks intently into the teachings of scripture actually begins to take it to heart. They see themselves as they are. When I'm not looking in the mirror, I feel like I am about 30. When I look in the mirror, I don't see my father anymore, I'm really seeing my grandfather. Not quite sure how that happened. You walk away and you think: Oh, no, I'm really about 30, right? Ok.

When I was 36 I visited the campus of Lock Haven and I have always done this, go to college, visit students, take them to lunch, just keep them connected to the church. It was late April, a warm day there and all these girls were sunning themselves in bathing suits. I pulled myself up and I realized: Give it up, Bob. They look at you as an old man. So, it is.

The person who looks at the scripture and takes it to heart, puts it into practice, will become the kind of person in whom maturity of faith is seen and their life will show fruit. Now, James is not dumping a load of guilt on us. Guilt has its place. Guilt is a focus on behavior and sometimes guilt is what we feel when we have not been true to ourselves and to our core and there is a remedy. The remedy is honesty and confession and as needed making amends. Sometimes

you have to do that, but there is a difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is about what we have done. But shame is about who we are. Jesus has taken our shame, bore it on the cross with him and he gives us the freedom of new birth, of a new life, and a new start with God, one that is birthed in love so that we can grow as mature persons who do love the way God has made us to love.

Now, what does that look like? James made it really practical. He said: look after the widows and the orphans. Don't participate in the ways of this godless world. You'll never find a moment in the life of Jesus where he puts another person down with shame, calls them a nasty name. He never does that. When they tortured the man, they did terrible things to him, and he never responded that way to others. He always controlled his tongue, never lost his temper. There's an old saying, those of you who know anything about pools will understand it right away: don't lose your temper, you might need it. Right? Some of you got that. And he just never gave up his trust in God. Didn't give himself to the pollution of a corrupt world and yet he made friends with all the so called wrong kinds of people. What he did is he lifted them up and by lifting them up then he held them to be in touch with God, find the source of that love for themselves and this kind of faith and practice is the kind of faith that pleases God and it's the kind that grows us up in love and maturity.

I have a friend from a previous parish named Pat, very modest, works very hard. She is a sworn enemy of dirt. Some of you, most of you, have a Pennsylvania Dutch background, right? You hate dirt. That just comes with the territory. She hates dirt. You could eat off the garage floor of her house. She hates clutter. She doesn't like anything untidy. If you leave it in the way, it's going to be gone, it will be thrown out and it's your problem not hers. And rarely does a day go by on Sundays when she is not in worship, very faithful. One Sunday morning, it was a summer morning, a man walked into the church as a visitor. He had some from the nearby homeless shelter and to be honest, he was filthy dirty. He really was. And he smelled bad, really bad. And it was summer. He was probably in his 60s. He appeared to be someone who had really struggled in life, probably had some mental and emotional difficulties. I went up and I greeted him, kind of like this...he smelled really bad. Of course, I had to go to the service: nice to see you, glad to have you, ok. Pat also greeted him. Took his hand firmly in hers. She said: Are you visiting? He said: Yes. She said: Why don't you sit with me. What is your name? And I'm thinking: Pat is a sworn enemy of dirt. This guy represents everything she can't stand. She asked him nothing about his life or his journey. She simply sat with him, shared a hymnal and hospitality in that worship service. And he came back the next week and the next week and the next week for about three months while he was residing at the shelter. I doubt many people gave him any kind of attention at all, probably next to none. But Pat gave him respect and hospitality and Mike sat with her each Sunday and she became the love of Christ to Mike in just action.

Faith is an action verb. It looks for ways to love and to respect others with the love of Christ that we've received and that makes all the difference in the world. Amen.