**Don’t Just Stand There, Do Something!**

**Text: James 1:22-23**

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When I was in 6th grade, I had my first big taste of leadership. Among other things, I headed-up a class project: we were charged with the task of writing a play. The class was studying ancient history, so the play had something to do with going back in time to Mesopotamia; to the cradle of civilization.

Well, we got to work right away. We formed a steering committee to oversee the project. We formed sub-committees to look after all the aspects of writing a script and staging the production. We had the most amazing organization that a bunch of 6th graders could design. And I was so proud to be the leader of it all.

Only trouble was, we never got around to putting on the play. We got some of the script written, but that was about it. The design was amazing! But there was no final product.

This long-forgotten memory returned to me last week as I pondered today’s scripture lesson. James says, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers…For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror” (James 1:22-23). We certainly *heard* the word that said, “Go write that play.” But we never *did* it.

“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.” You see, the Word of God is what calls us and all Creation into being. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” says the opening of John’s gospel. “He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:1-3). The Word of God is that which creates, and then keeps on creating. God is a worker who gets things done. And God calls the Church to be engaged in significant work as well; work for the sake of God’s Kingdom. One thinks of the opening scene in Acts, where the Risen Christ has just been taken-up into the clouds. The disciples are standing there, gazing-up into heaven, when two angels come along and say, in effect, “Don’t just stand there, *do* something! This story is called the Book of *Acts*, for crying out loud!!” (see Acts 1:6-11).

The Letter of James picks-up on this activist strain of Christianity. Yes, there’s a place for prayer and meditation; mysticism is a strong part of our faith. Yes, there’s a place for study and pondering. We are, after all, called to love God with our whole *mind*. These are valuable ends in themselves. But prayer and study are also ways to equip the Church for *action*. “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God,” Jesus says (Matthew 6:33). It’s not going to come on its own; we have to work with God to complete it. When the Church is engaged in deeds of love and mercy, when the Church is being generous and caring for others, when the Church is seeking justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8), we’re engaged in significant work for the sake of the Kingdom. James puts it this way: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God…is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27).

Don’t just stand there, do something! And among the books of the Bible, the Letter of James stands out in its advocacy for action. Martin Luther called this letter “an epistle of straw,” because he thought that James went too far in advocating the role of good works in the overall scheme of salvation; he saw James as a challenge to the notion that we are saved by grace alone. What he missed, of course, is that the activism of James is *empowered* by grace. The Church does the good works that James calls us to do not on our own, but in the power of the Holy Spirit. Which is part of the reason why prayer is so important. Some folks in the Church need to be deep in prayer so that others in the Church can tap into the Spirit’s power that is accessed *through* prayer. Thus even our good works flow from the saving grace of the Holy Spirit. Empowered by the Spirit, we are called to minister especially to the least, the lost and the lonely. But also, to share with *anyone* beyond our walls the good news of God’s love, in word and in deed. That’s what the Epistle of James is all about.

We’re going to explore this epistle over the coming four or five weeks. So first, a bit of background:

Traditionally, this letter has been attributed to James, the brother of Jesus. But Jesus’ name appears only twice in the letter, and you’d think that Jesus’ brother would use his name a bit more than that. Furthermore, it is written in an elegant Greek style that would be uncharacteristic of a Jewish man raised in a poor home in Galilee. So Jesus’ little brother is probably not the author. But the letter does reflect both Jewish wisdom and Greco-Roman ethical teaching; it could’ve been written by a second generation Christian who was *influenced* by James. As well, the letter recognizes the fact that early Christians are living and serving in community, with all of the joys and challenges that are involved with sharing life together with others. Within that context of community, the letter encourages the Church to pray with the sick and suffering, to acknowledge one’s own sins, to speak the truth, and to bring sinners back to the truth.

And, of course, James acknowledges the importance of rolling-up one’s sleeves and getting to work! You might even summarize his message this way: “Get to work, for Christ’s sake!” Not for our own sake, but for *Christ’s* sake. As we’ve said before, the Church exists for others. We roll-up our sleeves to care for the lost and the lonely, the homeless and the unemployed, the bewildered young person and the forgotten old person; and in so doing we care for the Christ. This is Matthew 25, eh? Jesus said, “As you have cared for the least of these, you have cared for me” (Matthew 25:40).

“Do something, for Christ’s sake,” James says. This is where we have to be careful, because it is so easy to do something *ostensibly* in Jesus’ name, but really we’re doing it for *ourselves*. We’re going through the *motions* of doing something for others, but we’re working primarily to make ourselves feel good; or to show others what good, caring, righteous Christians we are. Like the folks that Jesus warned about in the 6th chapter of Matthew. They had someone sound a trumpet whenever they made an offering for the poor, so that they could draw attention to themselves (Matthew 6:1-4). Or the people in a church some years back that ran a homeless shelter. Man, they were doing *everything* for those folks: putting out the cots, fixing a nice meal, giving away all sorts of yummy treats, looking the other way when shelter rules were broken because, of course, these were such poor, needy people and they *really* need us to do *everything* for them. Yeah, right. Most of those poor, needy people were perfectly capable of putting out the mats themselves. Some of those poor, needy people were quite capable of helping in the kitchen. And we all need to be held accountable to some rules. If I’m super busy doing things for people who can do things for themselves, guess what my first priority is? Not caring for another, but drawing attention to me. Showing off to others what a wonderful person I am. It’s like the person in James who’s looking in a mirror. Yes, that person is doing something, but they’re having a whole lot of fun *watching* themselves do it. And hoping that others are watching them as well. They’re *hearing* the word that says, “Care for others,” but what they’re *really* doing is caring for themselves.

Probably every church that’s ever been engaged in community service has fallen into this trap to one degree or another. It’s a very human thing to do. So if the Church is going to reach beyond its walls in Jesus’ name, we have to be aware of what we’re really doing, and why we’re doing it. Are we doing something for ourselves, or are we doing something for others; are we doing something for the Kingdom? And perhaps one way to answer that question is to ask another one: if we *stopped* doing this, would anyone beyond our walls really notice?

Don’t just stand there, do something! By the way, do you know how many Christians it takes to change a light bulb? Well, it takes 5 to form the committee, but the light bulb never really gets changed.

And when we’re engaged in action for the sake of the Kingdom – as this congregation has been in the past and the present, and it will be in the future – when we’re engaged in action for the sake of the Kingdom, we need to make sure that we have a governance structure that facilitates that action. Not a heavy-duty structure that is so big and complex that you spend most of your time and energy maintaining the structure itself, but a structure that is streamlined and nimble; ready to roll and equipped for action. Too many mainstream churches have a board and committee structure that’s leftover from the days when the congregations were much bigger and you needed that big structure. But now the structure is just getting in their way. It’s hard to do something for Christ’s sake when you’re bearing a set of by-laws that’s become a heavy burden. I mean, Jesus said, “Come to me, *all* who carry heavyburdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Well, maybe we have to lay down that bureaucratic burden if we’re going to do something for the Kingdom. Here at First Christian we’ve made some progress in this regard; we’ve streamlined our structure to some extent. The Board isn’t nearly as big as it used to be, and that’s good. But we still have a ways to go. As we live into our Future Story, we’ll have to discern what kind of structure we need in order to do the work of Jesus. Perhaps we’ll have to hit pause on some of our processes and experiment with new ways of deciding what we’ll do and who will do it. That’s something that we’ll need to think about; and pray about.

I’ve probably said before that the Church needs to be like a middle infielder – like a 2nd baseman or shortstop – light and nimble and on your toes and ready to go in whatever way you have to go in order to stop a ground ball or catch a line drive. And you know, I’ve never seen a 2nd baseman wearing a backpack. Back in the days of Cincinnati’s “Big Red Machine,” Joe Morgan never ran onto the field wearing a big, heavy pack.

That’s the way that the Church must be: shedding whatever is weighing it down. Laying down those heavy burdens so that it can get-up and do something; for Christ’s sake.

And when you let go of some of that heavy stuff – whether its committees that you don’t really need or ministries for which you no longer have the volunteers or a job that you never really wanted to do in the first place – when you let go of those things…it is *such* a relief! It’s so liberating! It frees you to do whatever it is that God is *really* calling you to do. And in that freedom, serving the Lord becomes no longer a burden, but a delight!

Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. Pray about it, think about it, and then do it! Yes, pray about it. But do not ask God to guide your footsteps if you’re not willing to move your feet. Amen.