

DOERS WHO ACT<sup>1</sup>  
James 1: 17-27  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
August 30, 2009

On my first Sunday back in the pulpit after being away for a half-sabbatical, I find it appropriate that the lectionary text begins with these words: *Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above....* The provision for a sabbatical is a generous act, and I have received it with gratitude. I have also tried to use these weeks in a way that will benefit the ministry of this church. So I want to begin by saying thank you for your recognition of the value of setting aside some extended time for study and reflection. It is truly a *generous act of giving*.

I

Now I want to share three quick stories. The first is about a Mennonite farmer from Shipshewana, Indiana. He was approached by a group of southern evangelicals outside Yoder's Supply Store. They challenged him with this question: "Brother, are you saved?" The old farmer was stunned by their question. As a life-long member of Peach Bloom Mennonite Congregation, he had never been asked that question. After a long pause, he asked them for some paper and a pen and proceeded to list the names of ten people he believed knew him well. Most of them, he explained, were his friends, but

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some were less than that and might even be his enemies. He suggested that the eager young evangelists ask those people whether they thought him saved since he certainly would not presume to answer such a question on his own behalf.

The second story is about a Baptist ethicist named Henley Barnett. He was, in fact, my teacher of ethics. When he died at the age of 93, one of his colleagues and a member of the same church (Wayne Ward) told a story about Barnett's "credo." He said that Barnett had written in a pew Bible in the rear of the sanctuary these words: "Remember you show your love of this divine word not by the words you say about it but by living it day by day."

The third story is about St. Francis of Assisi, who succinctly summed up the message of his life when he was quoted as saying, "Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words."

A Mennonite, a Baptist, and a 13<sup>th</sup> century Catholic monk shared a common belief system. They all understand faith as something you do. They knew that walking the walk is a better gauge of authentic faith than talking the talk.

Yet much of Christianity down through the centuries has implied that the really important thing is correct doctrine. How many "heretics" have been burned at the stake, exiled from home, excommunicated from their church

community, thrown into prison, ridiculed and reviled, made to feel like they were doomed to eternal damnation, and forced to live lives of guilt—simply because they did not hold what was considered correct doctrine?

Consider the contents of what we know as the Apostles' Creed, which was not written by the apostles but was adopted by the church in the second century. It begins like this: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried...."

While the Apostles' Creed is loved and repeated by millions of Christians weekly and articulates orthodox Christianity, have you ever noticed that it skips the teachings of Jesus? It bypasses the Sermon on the Mount, the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, the whole contents of Matthew 25, which locates Jesus in the hungry, the sick, the naked, and the left out. It completely skips any examples of how to live. The creed, in other words, quietly teaches us that what we say is what defines faith, not how we live.

## II

What is known as the Book of James in the New Testament is a correction to that approach. Those who are familiar with Reformation history

may have heard the quotation from Martin Luther, who reportedly called the book of James “an epistle of straw.” He clearly did not like it, and he wanted it deleted from the New Testament. The reason he did not like it was that Luther’s favorite text was Paul’s statement in Galatians 2:16: *...a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.* Yet in the book of James we read this clear statement: *You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone* (James 2: 24). For a long time churches that grew out of the Reformation largely ignored the book of James because they secretly thought Luther was right.

Most of us, I suspect, would say that our faith is best expressed, not so much by what we say, as by what we do. Living an authentic Christian life is a far better gauge of what we believe than what we say. So I’m glad we did not throw out the book of James. It stands as a constant reminder that for faith to be real, it is not enough to be just a hearer of the word; it is not enough just to be a speaker of the word; but to be, as the author of James phrased it, *doers of the word.*

The time I have spent thinking and studying this summer has allowed me the privilege of thinking long and hard about our church. I used a method of thinking that is encouraged by many organizational analysts. It is called “appreciative inquiry.” Appreciative inquiry works on the assumption that

whatever you want more of, already exists in an organization. Appreciative inquiry focuses on solutions that are already there.

So while my study this summer has been on a global ethic, thinking through three great and powerful religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, I have also used that study time to think appreciatively about this local congregation. And what I have experienced is a tremendous appreciation for the way this congregation has lived out its beliefs.

There is always room for improvement. Like most other mainline churches, we do not have the numbers we had in the 50's. The pool of available volunteers for the church has decreased. Things cost much more than they used to. We could go on and on describing challenges. But taking an appreciative inquiry approach leads us to say, "Look at what is right!" And what is right in this community is enough to make us humble, and to give thanks to God for a community of Christians who live out their Christian faith in a multitude of ways. To use the phrase in the book of James: *...those who... persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blest in their doing.*

### III

*...doers who act....* That is the basis for good religion, and the writer of the book of James gives about as good a definition of authentic religion as I can

imagine. Here it is: *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows, in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

*Orphans and widows* is first century shorthand. What does it mean? To be perfectly blunt about it, *orphans and widows* is shorthand for people without insurance! Really! In that culture, the husband or father was their insurance policy. When you needed a home, he was there. When you were sick, he made sure you were cared for. When you died, he made sure your family was cared for. He was their insurance policy. *Orphans and widows* were vulnerable in that culture because they had no protection. They had lost their insurance.

Translated into our culture, the phrase refers to the poor, the overlooked, the underestimated, passed by, stepped on, the vulnerable, those who are counted only as statistics. It is shorthand for people who are one paycheck away from hunger, one illness away from bankruptcy, one layoff away from homelessness. *To care for orphans and widows in their distress....* And clearly, there are millions of people in such distress both in our country and around the world. Good religion does not ignore them, lump them into a statistic, or blame them. Good religion genuinely cares for them and acts in ways that offers help.

That kind of good religion is here in abundance, and we can build on it. I want to close with another true story. This is a story about a church not unlike ours. I learned about this church from our friend Shanta Premawardhana, who is now the Director of Interfaith Relations for the World Council of Churches. Shanta is from Sri Lanka, and he knows about the Cinnamon Gardens Baptist Church in Sri Lanka. (Isn't that a wonderful name?)

When the devastating tsunami hit Sri Lanka on December 26, 2004, the members of the Cinnamon Gardens Baptist Church saw that a little fishing community on the coast near them lost every home. The owners of those homes were Buddhist. These Baptists determined that they would build homes for their Buddhist neighbors who had lost everything. Funds were raised, everyone pitched in, and on April 7, 2007, in a simple ceremony, the keys to the newly built houses were handed over to the families who had lost their homes. This act was especially significant because relations between Sri Lankan Buddhists and Christians had not been good. But these Baptists determined that the "widows and orphans" in their neighborhood were these poor fishermen families who had lost everything.

#### IV

The poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a poem based on this text about real religion. Like many others, this Quaker poet was repulsed by religion that

was all talk and no action. An old friend of mine used to call it “mouth profession without heart possession.” Whittier wrote the familiar poem, “O Brother Man,” which reflects his own understanding of true religion, and it reflects precisely what the book of James says.

“To worship rightly,” says Whittier, “is to love each other.” And it is in that loving and caring for people that all our grandiose religious sentiment touches earth, our lives count for something, order is created out of chaos, pain is relieved, a flicker of hope is lit in someone’s life, and encouragement is given.

It has been said that when the Greeks heard the gospel they turned it into a philosophy; when the Romans heard the gospel they turned it into a government; when the Europeans heard the gospel they turned it into a culture; when the Americans heard the gospel they turned it into a business. But the gospel is not a philosophy, a government, a culture, or a business. It is a way of life, following the way of Jesus. This is real religion; this is faith at its Christian, human best. This is the First Baptist Church of Worcester at its best.

Well done, good and faithful servants, doers of the word and not hearers only!