

Action ~ August 30, 2009
James 1:17-27; Psalm 15

Years and years ago, when I was serving my first church in Wisconsin, I met a young woman who was living a difficult life. She was a child of the church who had grown up and married her high school sweetheart and who had 2 children, one of whom was diagnosed with childhood diabetes at the age of three, the other who had surgery at an early age for a “lazy eye. Her husband suffered from Krohn’s Disease. Their marriage ended after several years and her dear husband, Tim, died of cancer a few years later. This young woman’s name was Wendy and I came into her life when she desperately needed the church to give her some form and balance. She needed the church for the relationships it provided her—with others and with God.

Wendy did everything around the place from serving as secretary to running the youth group to performing some sort of unusual liturgical dance on Good Friday that gave everyone the chills. She had a very strong faith that carried her through many ups and downs in life. I will always remember that her favorite scripture reading was the one for this morning. Very often I would hear her say, “Be ye doers of the word, not hearers only.”

I, as a pastor, liked the way Wendy was always willing to volunteer to do anything for anyone. Our faith system is one of relationships and action. We cannot practice Christianity the way it is intended to be practiced by sitting in a corner by ourselves. We need to interact with the people and the world around us.

Jesus focused his life and teachings on the development of relationships between humans and between humans and God. This was the essence of his message—a variation on the “golden rule.”

Along with developing better, deeper relationships, the followers of Christ were also called to act. Not just to sit at his feet on a hillside and listen to his words or, later, to read them, but to put them into action. When we live his words in our daily lives we become living examples of his way and part of those working to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth—a kingdom Jesus told us was among us. We have been given the responsibility for discovering and establishing it.

The author of the little Letter of James believed that works were important if we were to implement the Christian faith. He urged those who received his letter to stop paying lip service to what they knew of Jesus and to begin putting actions to the worlds.

We need to understand that, when this letter was written there was a debate between people who believed that the pathway to heaven was one of simply having faith and those who believed that the surest way to those pearly gates was to live a life of good works and deeds. Paul was a proponent of the “faith and grace” theory while James thought that with faith there was a needed element of works. People still debate this. Where each of us comes down in this discussion depends on our religious background.

I know I have told you many times that the church in which I was raised was pretty much a “works” church. It believed in the value of its members being doers of the word. Action was needed.

Faith was vital but it was to lead us to doing good works for our community of faith and in the community at large. We were to be followers in the footsteps of Jesus. This blend of faith and works always assured us of a nice variety of volunteers for everything from running rummage sales to teaching Sunday school to making meals for a community dinner project located far away from the church. I found myself a willing participant in many activities. Often on a Friday evening I delivered macaroni and cheese and fish to St. Vincent DePaul on the far south side of Milwaukee. We fed many people in those days, primarily young families. This program continues to this day, nearly 30 years later.

The benevolence program at my home church was 1/10 of the total budget. So, \$20,000 to \$30,000 was annually set aside for donations to worthy causes. I know that this amount has grown as has the budget while the membership has decreased. Although this church was and is a great deal larger than we are, the majority of the work was done by a small core of dedicated people devoted to such good works having heard the call of Jesus upon their lives. There were only about 20-30 of us in a 1000 member church.

When I look back at my home church and fondly remember Wendy, I sometimes wonder why we don't always realize that faith without works is dead. Why do we sometimes hold back from doing something that serves the greater good? Why do we sit on our hands when we have the skills that are needed for a vital job?

Perhaps, we do this simply because we are human, we are tired and we just cannot take on another commitment in our lives. Perhaps, we do not always know there is a need. But, often, we discover, when we stretch that final bit to meet a such a need, we make all the difference in the world for others and for ourselves. Sometimes all it takes is moving an inch further to accomplish much.

The author of James reminds us that action is an important ingredient of our faith. Do we hear his words? Will they move us to action? The choice is always ours.

--Amen