

“Are We the Christians Who Don’t Do Anything?”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Long time ago, when Ben and Emma were little, they enjoyed watching Veggie Tales, a cartoon that features singing, dancing vegetables. Many of the songs and skits tell a story from the Bible or have a Christian message, like forgiveness, patience, or honoring your parents. My favorite, though, features a cucumber named Larry, a chick pea, and a grape wearing an eye patch, singing “The Pirates Who Don’t Do Anything,” and it goes something like this (sing along if you want): “We are the pirates who don’t do anything. We just stay at home and lie around. And if you ask us to do anything, we’ll just tell you, we don’t do anything.”

My favorite verse comes in the middle. “And I never hoist the mainstay, and I never swab the poop deck, and I never veer to starboard ‘cause I never sail at all.” It’s funny because it’s absurd. These vegetables are not only claiming to be pirates, but pirates who never do anything. In a way, that’s good, because pirates hijack ships, take people hostage, steal cargo, and demand ransom.

But when you look at Veggie Tales, which focuses so much on what it means to be a Christian, we can detect that these do-nothing pirates might be singing about something more serious, like what it means to be a do-nothing Christian, and that’s not very funny, because some people claim to be Christian, but if you ask them to do anything, they’ll just tell you, we don’t do anything, and that’s a problem for the Church and for people who like the idea of being a Christian, but who might have not a clear idea of what that means. We’ve all been there at some point.

In his letter, James addresses this problem, encouraging us to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror, for they look at themselves and on going away immediately forget what they were like.” What James means is that people who say, “We are the Christians who don’t do anything,” are horribly mistaken, because there is no such thing. Christians are people who act, motivated by gratitude, inspired by grace.

The fullness of faith is found through activity, through merciful ministry, which sometimes means staying silent. Without this pattern of practice, a Christian faces a terrible identity crisis. They don’t know who they are, because their behavior fails to reflect who they say or think they are.

This happened with the Pharisees. Strong opponents of Jesus, these guys were experts in the Torah, which contains 613 laws. People relied on them to make sense of it all, to give practical guidance on how to stay faithful to their covenant with God. Pharisees helped people figure out how to reinterpret ancient law for present-day situations. A lot of those laws dealt with what you can and cannot eat or drink and how you’re supposed to prepare and consume it, so when the Pharisees criticized Jesus because some of his disciples didn’t wash up before dinner, they were ostensibly just fulfilling their purpose, intending to help. But it’s pretty obvious that’s not what they intended at all.

Instead, they wanted to make Jesus look bad, because he was a threat to their turf. His healings and feedings and exorcisms and words of wisdom were convincing more and more people that Jesus knew what was best. So the Pharisees fought him. They looked for opportunities to portray him as a man who didn’t respect tradition and was, therefore, radical and dangerous.

But Jesus saw right through them. “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!” he told them in Matthew’s gospel. [23:24] In other words, you Pharisees have lost all perspective on what you’re doing and why, and without perspective, you have become superficial, focused on appearances rather than what really matters, and this is made plain in how you’ve abused the Law as a weapon against me. Your intent to harm no longer matches up with your purpose to help. You complain not to correct the disciples but to discredit me. You’ve lost your identity. You no longer know who you are.

But God can put anything to good use. Through the Pharisees and their rage and sense of superiority, Jesus teaches us that the difference between being faithful and being a sinner is the same as the distance between our intent and our purpose, and that loss of perspective serves as a sign that intent and purpose are getting farther apart. When our intentions stray from God’s purpose for our lives, we live on the surface instead of the depths, and we sin.

To hold your tongue, when everybody else is wagging theirs as fast as it will go, is a very loving but difficult thing to do. To “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” seems evasive, even cowardly, to many in the world. When we do speak faithfully, those words of love seem insincere to the cynic, and incomprehensible to some.

But when God’s purpose finds expression through our intentional words and silences, we know true unity. We experience and express true life, full of integrity and perspective; a life where deception and rancor has no place. It feels good, not to worry about what people want to see but simply to be who we are as children of a loving God.

With patience we will receive the blessing of being whole, no longer shallow and fragmented, but whole, integrated, unified. We don’t have to spend our lives twisted into emotional, spiritual knots. We can live straight up. Allowing God to close the distance between

purpose and intent, making those two things one, grants true perspective that reveals the wise way to live. This is the hope of our calling, the true nature of our faith.

As Christians, we are called to wholeness, and the only way we can find that wholeness is to follow Jesus, “to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves,” to act with integrity and mercy for the people who hurt and have need. Only in that faithful action do we discover our true identity, where our intent and God’s purpose meet. We cannot be the Christians who don’t do anything. That is a blatant contradiction in terms, and there is no joy, no hope, and no peace in it, for anyone. But when we accept the word with meekness, and act on what it says and do something, we get clarity and the power to be kind. Amen.