

The Purpose Question

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James 2:14-26

CHILDREN'S TIME

Do you like to play games? I like to play games. This morning we are going to play a game. It is called the "Things That Go Together" game. I have several things in this bag. When I pull one out, you tell me what goes with it.

The first thing in my bag is a nail. What goes with a nail? That's right a hammer. How about a pencil. What goes with a pencil? an eraser or paper, very good! A screw? Yes, a screwdriver! How about a comb? That's right, hair. You all are pretty good at this game. It is actually pretty easy, some things just naturally go together, don't they?

When we love Jesus, the Bible tells us that there is something that just naturally goes with it. Do you know what it is? The Bible says that if we love Jesus, we will show it by the way we live, by the things that we do. Those two things go together just like a comb and hair, or like a hammer and nail.

If we love Jesus, and then lie to our parents, those don't go together, do they? If we love Jesus, and then steal something that doesn't belong to us, do those two things go together? No, of course not. If we love Jesus and then say something mean about someone, do those go together? No! God wants us to love Jesus and do things that fit together with loving Jesus.

SERMON

Last week, we talked about our identity as people of faith both individually and as a community. We talked about how this is part of how we discern our direction as a congregation.

We reaffirmed that all of us are sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, made in the image of God, and loved beyond what any of us can imagine. Before doing anything, as human beings, we are enough just as we are.

This is our identity.

There is nothing that we can do to earn God's favor and love, and nothing that we can do that will have God not love us. We live inside this unconditional grace of God!

However, our response to God's love and grace is to live as God created us to live, doing good things.

Listen to the words of James, the brother of Jesus, who became a prominent leader in the early Church.

READ JAMES 2:14-26

James was writing here probably to address an issue the early Church had that is still an issue in the Church today.

There were people who said they were believers but they didn't show it by the way that they lived. Their lives didn't jive with their faith.

James pointed to two different people in history whose lives were examples of faith with action to back it up. The first was Abraham.

Now Abraham has often been lauded as a person of faith in a number of other Biblical writings. He is the great-grandfather of the faith for not only us as Christians, but also our Jewish and Muslims brothers and sisters. James points to Abraham's action anchored on his willingness to sacrifice even his beloved son Isaac.

Although his heart was wrenched, Abraham maintained the integrity

of his faith when everything important to him was hanging in the balance.

Abraham's faith and his action were working with each other in sync. His action was an illustration of his faith, and his faith was fulfilled in his action.

James then found an unusual person from history to highlight how faith and action work together. He dug up the story of Rahab, the non-Jewish, pagan prostitute.

Rahab was the woman who lived in Jericho just before Joshua led the Hebrew people across the Jordan into the promised land. In the story, Joshua sent two spies into Jericho on a recon mission to scope out the city before invading.

They met Rahab who not only claimed faith in the God of Israel, but risked her life by acting on her faith and sheltering the two spies and redirecting the troops who were looking for them. Rahab and her family were spared.

As the story goes on she married an Israelite man, became the great, great, grandmother of King David, and is listed in the ancestral lineage of Jesus!

James was drawing attention to the fact that not everyone who

claims to have faith truly does, because they are not putting it into action, and faith cannot survive without action.

So, there is this tension between those who say they are people of faith and those who actually are living it out. There are recent studies that show this is also the case in our world today.

The Barna Research Group completed a study in 2016. Others, like the Pew Research Center and Gallup have found similar results in their studies.

Barna found in 2016 that nearly 73% of the 245 million Americans identified themselves as Christians. However, only about 31% of Americans worship once per month or more.

Barna concluded that regular worship attendance was the best signifier of what they consider a “practicing Christian.”

But if we want to give people the benefit of the doubt we could look at other statistics. 75% of Americans say they have prayed in the past week — that corresponds to the attendance numbers. But only 34% have read their Bible and 19% have volunteered at a non-profit or their church, and only

about 17% have attended a Bible study or a Christian small group.

This highlights that there is a gap between those who claim faith in Jesus and those who are actually practicing their faith.

James said that many people claim faith, but their lives show no support for their claim. He wrote that essentially there is no way to support faith without having action in sync along side it. He uses pretty strong language — saying that unless someone is living out their faith with action, their faith is literally dead!

This would be like someone claiming to be a builder without ever having built a building. Or someone claiming to be a medical doctor without ever having treated a patient. Or it would be like someone claiming to be a gardener without ever having planted anything.

A person who claims that they are a follower of Jesus but doesn't get together with other people of faith, or read their Bible, or serve others, or commit to doing anything that Jesus did, is not only misrepresenting themselves to others, but are lying to themselves. It would probably be more authentic for them not to claim faith in Jesus at all.

So, how does this relate to the process of discernment we have been talking about these past couple of weeks.

When we are discerning how God is leading us as a congregation, we consider our identity, who we are as a people of faith.

We also consider that we have a purpose not only as individuals, but as a community of people. We respond to the unconditional grace God has given us with action as a community.

We cannot simply be resigned to an intellectual pursuit, merely knowing the right kinds of things about God. James says that demons know the right things and they shutter.

No, we certainly need to have knowledge and we need to have faith, but we must put our faith into action or else it will wither away and die.

But we are not talking about random action taken willy nilly.

As a congregation we engage in discernment to sort out the kinds of action that makes sense for us in light of our faith.

To do this, we have to assess what our experience is as a

congregation. Together, what are our strengths? What have we done well in the past and at the present?

Along with this understanding of what we have to offer, we also look out at what the needs of the world are around us.

We linger in prayer around these things and through this discernment process we'll be able to say with clarity,

"We are a beloved people of God with these specific strengths and resources, and we are using them to meet this specific need in our community.

The truth is that when we are doing things that God is calling us to do, we will be alive in our faith. Our experience of life as a community will become more vibrant than ever!

Who wouldn't want that?