



Actions Matter

SCRIPTURE:
James 2:14-17

August 8, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. —James 2:14-17 (NRSV)

Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense? —James 2:14-17 (The Message by Eugene Peterson)

Since November I have been serving as the interim site pastor at Village on Antioch. What that has meant for me most practically is that I am commuting. You see, I live a mile and a half away from our Village on Mission campus and often I walk to the church. Now, I have to do what many of you do every day—commute on I-35 and Highway 69.

A couple of weeks ago, I was driving southbound on I-35 and was taking the off-ramp to Highway 69. On my left side, a car zoomed up and I could tell he wanted to merge so I slowed down (because I am a true follower of Jesus) but instead of merging in front of me, he sped up past the car in front of me and squeezed in so that the car in front of me had to break. He was not pleased. He was so not pleased that he honked at the driver who had just cut him

off. I know. Honked. Not very “Midwest nice” of him. Then the car in front of me, who had honked, moved quickly into the right lane and moved around the car that had just cut in front of him and cut him off. It was like we were in first grade. “Hey! No cut-sies!” Then that car laid on his horn and rolled his window down, stuck his hand out of his window and directed a not-friendly gesture to the car now in front of him. And that’s when I saw it. The car that had started all this—the one who had just suggested a behavior with his hand, who was still laying on his horn—he had one of those Jesus ‘fish’ symbols on the back of his car. That’s when I thought about the bumper sticker that says, “I like Jesus. It’s his followers I can’t stand.”

Actions matter. Theologian John Westerhoff says that faith is a verb. He says that faith is a way of acting, of doing, of living. It is not so much something you *have* as something you *do*. He says we ought to be asking one another, “So, how was your faithing today? Did you faith well? Did you faith a lot or a little?” Faith is a verb. It is something you do.

That’s why James asks us what good is it—or what good are you—if you say all the right things but don’t do anything about it? He gives us an absurd illustration of encountering someone who has no clothes or is hungry and telling them to “keep warm and be satisfied” without actually giving them a warm coat or giving them something to eat. No wonder people discount the church. Because too often we talk a good game but don’t do anything.

In these days, I am convinced the way to share the good news of Jesus Christ is to lead with our actions. That’s why the aphorism says, “Actions speak louder than words.” Don’t just have faith. *Do* faith. Words are important but the words can come later. James is telling us: Start with the action. One of my

favorite phrases from our Senior Pastor Tom Are is: “Do the good that is yours to do.” Just do what it is that God has placed in front of you. You don’t have to worry about everything else in the whole world. Just do what God has given you to do. People will notice.

Schools are starting this week: Kansas City, Kansas, Olathe, and Shawnee Mission. Blue Valley starts next week. After college, my first calling was to teach junior high. Before school started, our principal shared some research with us about how the experience of each child on the first day of school can affect the trajectory of the whole school year. She reminded us that we wanted every student to have a great first day of school which would lead to a great year. We all readily agreed.

I taught 7th-grade core which was a combination of English and Social Studies, and as my second-period class started to come into my classroom, I noticed one student right away. He was a little blond-haired guy with blue eyes and he was turning different shades of green. It was not pretty. He was sick. He dragged his backpack into my classroom and took a desk on the side of the room and leaned his head against the wall. I went up to him right away and said, “Hello. I’m Mr. Nishioka.” He said, “I know who you are.” I said, “Who are you?” and he pointed to his name on my class list. Slater, Ryan D. I said, “Slater, Ryan D. You don’t look too good.” Slater, Ryan D. said, “I don’t feel very good.” I told him to get up and go down to the nurse’s office. My classroom was in the 700 building, and I told Ryan he had to walk through the 600 building and 500 building, take a left, and head to the 000 building which was the administration building. There he would find our nurse and she would take care of him. I called the nurse’s office to let her know he was on his way.

Three hours went by and I went to the administration building to check my mailbox and grab my lunch. The nurse’s office was opposite the teachers’ mailboxes and just as I turned around, I saw him, Slater, Ryan D., still sitting there looking worse than ever. I stuck my head in the office and asked the nurse, Thema Northrup, (a great nurse name), if I could speak to her. She stepped out of her office

and closed the door behind her. I said, “Thema, why is Slater, Ryan D. still here? I sent him to you at the start of second period more than three hours ago.” She looked at me and said, “Mr. Nishioka, you are not going to like this story. Ryan’s parents went through a divorce this summer and he is living with his Mom. She is out of town on business. I have left several urgent messages with his Dad’s office but his assistant says he is busy in critical meetings and cannot be disturbed. Ryan and his little sister are staying with their next-door neighbor, Joyce, but he doesn’t know her last name or her phone number. I think he’s just going to have to sit here until the end of the day and then go home on the bus.”

I went into her office and sat next to the little guy. He was leaning his head against a file cabinet and had his eyes closed. I nudged him gently and he opened his eyes and looked at me. I said, “Hey, Ryan. I’m Mr. Nishioka.” He said, “I still know who you are.” I said, “Ryan, I’m so sorry you’re still here but you can’t go home unless a responsible adult comes to pick you up.” He said, “That’s okay, Mr. Nishioka. Nobody would want me anyway.” And he started to cry. I thought to myself, “Oh, good grief, Lord. Fine. I’ll adopt the kid. Is that what you want?”

I gave him a hug then went back to teach the rest of the day. After the day was over, I went back to check on Slater, Ryan D. and the nurse’s office was empty. I found Mrs. Northrup. I asked her, “Thema, what happened to Ryan?” And she smiled and said, “Mr. Nishioka, you’re going to like this story.” She told me that after I left, she asked Ryan again if he could think of anyone who could come get him and take care of him and he said, “No.” Then after a few minutes, he said, “Maybe there is one person.” But he didn’t know her phone number either. Thema asked him who it was and he said her name was Becky and she was his Sunday school teacher at University Place Presbyterian Church. Thema called the church and talked with the pastor and he gave her Becky’s contact information. It turns out Becky was a realtor in the area and cleared her afternoon.

Thema said, “You should have seen Ryan’s face when Becky came into the office. She had a comforter over one arm and was funny and loud and

looked at him and said, ‘Ryan! Oh man, you look terrible! Hey, I’m going to take you home and feed you some soup. I’m going to take care of you.’ And she swooped up Ryan in her arms.” Thema said, “Mr. Nishioka, Ryan was doing his best to smile as she dragged him out of my office. You know, Mr. Nishioka, I think that woman just saved Ryan’s whole 7th-grade career.” And I smiled and said to Thema Northrup, because she is a believer like you

and me, “Thema, that woman was the embodiment of Jesus Christ.”

James says listening matters. Actions matter. Actions matter—so that a little guy who is sick on the first day of 7th grade will know that he is loved forever and ever. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.