

**“To Believe is To Care; To Care is To Do”**  
**James 1:17-27**  
**San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ**  
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“God Is Still Speaking” is not the first logo the United Church has used to convey its message. Some years ago, the church had a bumper sticker with today’s sermon title: “To Believe is To Care, To Care is To Do”. This logo is in keeping with today’s text from the letter of James.

James is considered to be Christian wisdom liturgy. He’s writing a skill set for early Christians. And he echoes the fundamentals of Jesus’ message. He writes: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

What does it mean to be “unstained from the world”? When I was a child I heard these words loud and clear, and they went against my basic instinct to have a sense of belonging in the world, to have friends, to be popular. What I heard was that it was good to be odd and different; but it didn’t feel good. When I couldn’t go to dances because standing that close to another person could lead to lust, when I couldn’t go to the public swimming pool because swimsuits were indecent, when I couldn’t spend the night with a friend because her family didn’t go to the one true church, when I couldn’t do all these things in order to “keep myself unstained from the world,” it didn’t feel good at all.

My childhood traumas may sound bizarre and irrelevant; but today in similar ways Christianity has been by some folks co-opted to focus on a few issues deemed to be important while ignoring others of equal or more importance. I talk to people all the time who are tormented by human-made “doctrines”. Because they don’t know what Jesus REALLY said and emphasized, they only hear preachers who teach what Jesus never said was the gospel, the good news. Many of us are here in this church today not because we were raised in the United Church, but because we cherish the freedom of thought and practice the UCC gives us permission to explore.

Yet, lest we gloat with pride, James reminds us: “be not deceived.” The Christian life is an ongoing process of self-examination within the context of a loving community. We rest in “blessed assurance” not because we’re so holy, but because we’re loved. Because we walk in the garden with God, and hear God’s still speaking voice, we are nudged into greater truth and understanding of who we are to be and what we are to do.

Belief is not a one-time confession that Jesus is Sovereign; belief is a constant uttering of not mere mortal words but of care and action that SHOWS the world that Jesus is Sovereign of our lives. “To Believe is to Care and To Care is to Do.” We are engaged in the dance of belief and action, of theology and praxis. And as our praxis improves with practice, our theology goes deeper into the very heart of God.

It’s interesting that James names *listening* at the top of the list of virtues. He says be quick to listen but slow to speak. This is a great comfort to those of us who are introverts.

James encourages “active listening” even before it became popular psychological practice. You know the difference when you talk with someone, whether they are paying attention to what you’re saying or just waiting to interject their wisdom when you take a breath. It is one of life’s greatest gifts to be REALLY heard. James says Christians are to be quick to listen and slow to speak. This admonition might give us pause in how we relate to one another and to the world. When speech comes too rapidly, it often takes the form of judgment. I remind myself as I listen to others, especially if they are expressing themselves passionately, to ask myself what life experience, perhaps what source of pain, is behind their passionate words.

It’s also interesting to take note of what James doesn’t list in this skill set for Christians. He doesn’t list the need to focus on just how God created the world, or focus on abortion, or sexual orientation, but it is those issues that make headlines today and which cause great division in the Christian community. He specifically mentions caring for those in distress, the widows and orphans.

Today -- in contrast to how, as a child, I was taught to keep myself unstained from the world -- I strive to seek Christ-like values that are often countercultural. I read in the Bible that Jesus didn’t place much value on how much stuff we produce or how much stuff we can consume. Living within a Christian community with you helps me to remember the priorities of Jesus. Your witness helps remind me of what is most important to Christian living. So “doing” is not the same as producing in order to have more to consume. “Doing” is the witness to the priorities of Christ over culture.

“To Believe is to Care, to Care is to Do.” “To Do” at it’s best, is in response to care, not guilt. James says every generous act of giving is God’s light streaming through us into a world in need. We respond in many different ways. Some of you distribute food, tutor children, teach Sunday school, raise money for good causes, stand for peace, share your knowledge, sing your song, play your music, give your insight and intellect, provide strong arms and legs to do the heavy lifting, grow flowers to touch our souls with beauty, share a word of encouragement, tell the truth when the truth is hard to tell, live lives of constant witness to a loving God, have the courage to stand up to wrong or to share the witness of your life.

Sometimes we get discouraged when we can’t do what we used to do, but as followers of Christ we have a vocation that changes as we change, and often our vocation is to simply lend our presence however and whenever we can. For the Christian community does not value mere productivity as the world values gross national product; the Christian community values the labor of reflecting the light of God, however we are able to do that. Tomorrow we celebrate those who labor. And we can witness to Christ by standing in solidarity with those from whose labor we benefit. But for the faithful, everyday is Labor Day. Though we sometimes hear the phrase, often spoken to children, “Do as I say, not as I do,” rarely, is this effective. Children watch what we do. Grownups watch what we do. James reminds us that actions speak louder than words and that “To believe is to care, and to care is to do.” May God give us strength and courage to act faithfully today and in the days to come.