

Off the Bench...Into the Game

James 1:19-27

February 11, 2007

Not too long ago, Toni and I were wandering around downtown Chicago and we happened to find a small art gallery with some truly wonderful works for sale. Being who I am, the first thing I looked at was the prices, which were way out of our league.

Toni, as is her nature, wasn't paying attention to any of those details at all, but was just enjoying the art. She was lost in her own world as she browsed through the watercolors, oils, and mixed media.

At one point, one of the store employees approached us and simply said, "Hello." Toni, still lost in her thoughts said, without looking up, "We're just here to look awhile." My reaction and the reaction of the sales associate were completely different. I breathed a sigh of relief while I watched the smile on the face of the sales clerk slowly diminish as she walked away.

I don't know for sure, but I wonder if she worked on commission. I've never done that, but I bet it really gets frustrating after awhile to hear people tell you over and over again that they are just browsing.

Let's face it. When we say, "Just looking," it means "Go away. I have no intention of buying anything." The malls are full of "lookers" who are just out to window shop, waste time, or just pretend that they are really in the market for a few new diamonds or a new Porsche.

Have you ever noticed that some people spend their entire lives "just looking?" People like this are never willing to invest their energies completely and totally in anything because of the risks involved.

People who go through life "just looking" drift in and out of jobs without ever finding a vocation. They drift in and out of relationships without ever daring to love. They drift in and out of communities without ever casting a vote or dropping any sort of anchor in the neighborhood. These are the kinds of folks who drop in and out of the church without ever opening their hearts to the Spirit of God or feeling the presence of the love of Christ.

As I read the lesson from James this morning, I get the feeling that he was feeling a similar sort of frustration with those around him.

James' epistle has had its share of detractors throughout the Christian era. Some have felt that the emphasis on works is in direct contradiction to Paul's attention to salvation by faith alone. Martin Luther, the sixteenth century German reformer, even went so far as to call James, "an epistle of straw."

Chapter 1: verse 22 clearly states James' interests. "Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear!"

That is what James is well known for...a vigorous emphasis on "doing," on action, on effort, on work. Actually, the Apostle Paul says almost the same thing in Romans 2:13, when he states, "...not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified." Later on, James will say, "Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove" (2:18).

I have a feeling that James was frustrated by the "lookers," those hangers-on who just stayed close enough to the church to make them feel good, but far enough away that they wouldn't be inconvenienced. He was talking about people who actually believed that they were Christians. They no doubt thought that they were. In actuality though, they were just bench-warmers and bystanders.

James was convinced that just hearing the word was not enough. He believed that Christians must also be "doers" or people who act on their faith. He saw works as the tangible effects and result of faith. It was obvious to him that faith which did not end in good works toward the people of God for whom Christ died, was not genuine faith.

Doing is always a part of faith. Search the Scriptures and you find that there are many instances of God's people acting without a plan.

I found the following in one of my files the other day. It doesn't sound like something I would write, but at the same time I don't know where it came from. I would give credit to the person who wrote it if I knew who he or she was.

Abraham didn't have a plan, but he packed up anyway and left home.
Moses didn't have a clue, but he confronted Pharaoh with God's ultimatum. Rahab didn't have a friend, but she hid the Israelite spies who were sent into Jericho.

Elijah didn't have a hope, but he defeated all the prophets of Baal.
Nehemiah didn't have a country, but he rebuilt the Wall of Jerusalem.
Mary didn't have a name, but she bore the Son of God. John the Baptist didn't have a home, but he made the wilderness his pulpit. Peter didn't have a backbone, but he became the "rock" of the church. Saul of Tarsus didn't have a heart, but Paul became the spokesman for the Gentiles.

All of these people and more may not have had a plan, but that didn't stop them from doing something anyway. There just isn't too much biblical evidence of people who made a difference without acting. The evidence is clear, I think, that people who are faithful children of God must be "doing" and not just "looking."

We Christians act because our faith is in the power of the Holy Spirit. We realize that the way forward is not always clear, the risks are real, the commitment required is total, and the results may sometimes be a surprise. Yet none of that frightens us away from action. Even when the going gets tough, we realize that we are never alone in our work.

There was this fellow out in California who one day decided that he wanted to see his neighborhood from a different and unique perspective. So he went down to his local Army Surplus store and bought 45 used weather balloons. He strapped himself into a lawn chair, had some friends inflate the balloons with helium, and attach them to the chair. He took along a six-pack of beer, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a BB gun, figuring that when he was ready to come down, he could just shoot the balloons one at a time.

But he was caught off guard when the balloons lifted him over eleven hundred feet into the air and right into the traffic pattern of Los Angeles International Airport. By then, he was too scared to shoot the balloons, so he just stayed airborne for more than two hours.

When he finally landed and was arrested by the police, some reporters were on the scene to ask him some questions. “Were you scared?” “Yes.” “Would you do it again?” “No.” “Why did you do it?” “Because,” he said, “You can’t just sit there.” It seems to be that being a part of the church means the same thing. You can’t just come to church and sit here. You have to do something.

Church growth experts say that one of the ways to grow the church is to find a way to keep people from joining and then becoming inactive. You see, there is no such thing in the New Testament as an inactive member of the church. That is an oxymoron and one of those terms we have invented which has no precedent in Scripture. I don’t care what sort of excuses are made or the number of mental and spiritual gymnastics you may engage in to justify anything less than full commitment...being a member of the church means that you get off your chair and DO something with your faith.

In the autumn of every year, all of our churches hold their annual Charge Conference. One of the tasks of this meeting is to hold people accountable for their discipleship. A few years ago, there was a guy who was a member of a church served by a friend of mine, whose name was removed from the rolls. He was livid and made an appointment to see the pastor. He read the riot act to my friend asking him where he got the nerve to take his name off the rolls.

First of all, my friend pointed out that it was not a lone decision, but that his name was removed by agreement of all members of the Charge Conference. Then he told this guy that he wanted to ask him some questions.

“When was the last time you worshipped with us?” The answer was “three or four years ago.”

“When was the last time you attended a Sunday School class?” “I haven’t gone to Sunday School since I was a kid.”

“When was the last time you went on a mission trip or worked a chili supper or pancake breakfast for missions?” “I never have.”

“When was the last time you sang in a choir, joined in a men’s group, participated in a prayer group, showed up for the church clean-up day, offered to usher on Christmas Eve, or brought a friend or neighbor to church with you?” The answer was, “I don’t do those things.”

The pastor said, “Well, according to the rules of the United Methodist Church, you aren’t a member. Even more importantly than that, according to the Bible, you aren’t a member. So the church didn’t do anything that you hadn’t already done. You removed yourself from membership a long time ago. The church just got around to recognizing that.”

Football teams do not win a lot of games if too many players decide to sit on the bench. The church will not survive – this church will not survive – if too many of our people refuse to get into the game, preferring instead to sit on the sidelines where it is safe and where not much is expected.

James knows that bystanders and benchwarmers are Christians in name only. Yes, it is true that one is saved by faith. Salvation comes through faith alone. But God is always on the lookout for evidences of faith. What are you doing with your faith?

If you say you are a Christian, then show it. Get up out of bed on Sunday morning, change out of your bathrobe and slippers, and come to worship with your sisters and brothers.

If you say you are a Christian, then show it. Tell someone about Jesus who doesn’t know him.

If you say you are a Christian, then show it. Help feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and pray for the oppressed.

If you say that you are a Christian and that you have faith, then show it. Come to Sunday School to deepen your faith and understanding. My kids and your kids all grew up because we fed them the right nutritious food. The same goes with our faith-life. It only grows when we feed it.

I want you to really think about this hard for a minute. Try this one out on your spouse, if you have the courage. Some night this week, say to your husband or wife, “I love you and am committed to our marriage, but I won’t be coming home for dinner anymore. In fact, I’ve taken an apartment across town. I’ll live over there. Of course I’ll visit on Christmas and Easter, but don’t count on me for Sunday dinners. I love you and am

committed to our marriage, but you'll have to handle the kids all by yourself. If you ever need help, don't trouble me. I love you and am committed to our marriage, but when it come time to cut the grass, clean out the gutters, rake the leaves, or paint the living room, I won't be there to help. And don't you ever decide that you don't want me because someday I may want to drop in for a meal or I may need to bring my boss over to meet my family."

Try that one on your husband or wife...I dare you. Do you think that your profession of love and commitment would be believable? I don't think so. You see, one's commitment is made concrete in action. One's faith is given shape by the things one is willing to do.

It is time for the church to be an alternative to the "just looking" culture. It is time for the church to call all of the members off of the bench and onto the field.

It is time to listen to the Spirit, trust in the Spirit's power, and put meat on our professions of faith. The game is much too important not to be involved...completely and totally...as led by our faith.