

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?
Part 1: Faith and Good Works

James 2:1-10, 14-17

A sermon preached by Eric Park on the weekend of September 9 and 10.

I am absolutely convinced that one of the most urgent and substantive challenges before us as people of faith is the challenge of remembering who we are and why we are. In this enormously seductive and distracting world in which we find ourselves living, where there is someONE at every turn who is eager to claim us, and where there is someTHING at every turn that is eager to define us, one of the most urgent challenges before us is the challenge of remembering who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I've shared with some of you before that the very last thing my father said to me before I left for college was precisely this: "SON, REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE." When he said that, I knew that he wasn't simply making reference to the remembrance of biographical information. He wasn't simply telling me to remember my phone number and address. He was telling me that, as I entered into the often-supervised environment of collegiate life, he wanted me to remain true to my identity and character as a baptized child of God and as a confirmed disciple of Jesus Christ. He wrapped his arms around me, and with tears streaming down his cheeks he whispered these words into my ear: "SON, REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE. REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE."

My father understood the urgency of that kind of remembering.

There was an episode of CHEERS in which Carla, the superstitious barmaid, was visiting a psychic in order to find some guidance in her life. When Frasier Crane, the psychiatrist, discovered that Carla was seeing a psychic, he began to reprimand her. "Carla, how could you be so foolish? Don't you realize that psychics merely encourage you to spill out all of the details of your life so that they might be able to appease your hunger for guidance with simplistic advice, all the while taking your hard-earned money?" To which Carla responded, "And how is that different from what you do as a psychiatrist?" Frasier, responded at first with awkward silence, and then finally with this: "Well...I can prescribe drugs!"

You see, Carla's question compelled Frasier to ponder the issues of his identity and purpose as a psychiatrist, issues that might help him to remember how his work differed from that of a run-of-the-mill psychic, and Frasier was not at all prepared for such pondering. "How am I different from a run-of-the-mill psychic? Well, uh...uh....um...I can prescribe drugs!"

On a television sitcom, it can be humorous when someone forgets who he is and why he is. It can become a source of great comedy. But in the life of discipleship to Jesus Christ, the stakes are much, much higher. In fact, when we forget who we are as

disciples of Jesus Christ, when we lose sight of our identity and purpose, when we abandon our calling to a life that is different than anything else that the world has to offer, it is nothing less than heartbreaking, perhaps even tragic.

For the next several weeks, I would like us to spend some time together remembering who we are as the church, the Body of Christ. More specifically, I would like for us to center ourselves in a question that I believe will help us to remember who we are—or at the very least, who we are called to be. The question is this: WHAT IS A DISCIPLE? It is a reasonable and important question, don't you think? After all, the mission of Central Highlands Church is clearly printed on the front of your bulletin: Why do we exist? We exist to make disciples of Jesus Christ through the ministry of Worship, Outreach, Relationship, and Discipline. Our purpose, our identity, our reason for being are inseparably linked to the task of making disciples out of one another and out of newcomers. That is how crucial discipleship to Jesus Christ is to us, and that is why this question is so critically important in the task of remembering our identity and purpose: WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

In the scripture that I shared with you moments ago from the New Testament book of James, a portion of the answer to that question is offered to us. The scripture begins with a clearly-offered word of judgment, meant to illuminate a tendency that is still all-too-common in our churches: The tendency of favoring the privileged and ignoring the poor. "If a person wearing fine clothes and gold rings comes into your assembly," tonight's Scripture proclaims, "and if a person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you cater to the one wearing fine clothes while ignoring the one wearing dirty clothes, have you not made unholy distinctions among yourselves, and have you not become judges with evil thoughts?"

Even in the first century church, you see, mere decades after the ministry of Jesus, church people had already forgotten who they were. They had already forgotten that they were disciples of a Christ who made clear that his face was to be seen in the faces of poor and hungry people. They had already forgotten that they were disciples of a Christ who had described the poor and the poor in spirit as being blessed, as though the poor were uniquely joined to the kingdom that Jesus came into the world to establish.

Fortunately, we have become so much more spiritually mature than those first century bigots, right? Fortunately we have grown out of the tendency to ignore the poor, the hurting, and the disenfranchised, right? Fortunately, all of our churches are completely welcoming of the least and the lost, right, the poorest and the dirtiest of our culture? Well...OK...perhaps we have a bit more growing to do that way. Perhaps there is still some unholy differentiation between people that occurs within our sanctuaries and fellowship halls. Perhaps bigotry is still an altar at which we occasionally worship.

I saw a cartoon in Christian Century magazine not long ago. In the cartoon, a desperate looking man with tattered clothing is on his knees, pounding with both hands on the doors of a church. A man wearing a suit and tie and an angry expression is also present in the cartoon, sticking his torso out of an open church window. The man in the suit and

tie speaks harshly to the man with tattered clothing. “Hey,” the man says, “Quit pounding on our door! Can’t you see we’re trying to worship in here?!”

Perhaps that cartoon highlights a sin that we continue to perpetuate in our churches. Perhaps bigotry and unholy differentiation between people still form an altar at which we occasionally worship.

In tonight’s scripture, after he highlights the unholy behavior of mistreating the disenfranchised and ignoring the poor, the biblical author offers a teaching that is as timeless as it is revelatory: “What good is it,” he writes, “if you say that you have faith, but do not have works?” What does scripture mean by “works?” It means good works. Works of compassion and ministry. Works emerging from a heart that has been transformed and reoriented by the love of Jesus Christ. “What good is it,” the biblical author writes, “if you say that you have faith but do not have works? If a brother or a sister is in trouble and lacks daily food, and you say to them, ‘God bless,’ but do not do anything to supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”

Then the biblical author encapsulates the urgency of his teaching in a powerfully unsettling way: “So,” he writes, “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” I want you to allow yourself to be unsettled and perhaps even undone by that biblical teaching tonight. Allow the teaching to make its way into every chamber of your soul. “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is not a saving faith. It is a dead faith.”

Over the centuries of Christian theology, Christian thinkers have perpetuated what I consider to be a misguided and unfortunate debate. The debate is normally referred to as the faith versus works debate, and it hinges on this theological question: Are we saved by faith or are we saved by our good works? People on both sides of the debate site particular scriptures to support their arguments. The people who believe that we are saved by faith alone (in Latin, “sola fide—faith alone”) are quick to site scriptures like Ephesians 2:8-9, which reads this way: “By grace we have been saved through faith, and this is not our own doing, but the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” That’s a pretty clear teaching, right?

But hold on. Because, on the other side of the debate are the people who maintain that salvation is received—not earned, mind you—but received through the doing of good and compassionate works. They site Scripture like Matthew 25:31-46, in which Jesus makes clear that, in the final judgment, our eternal reward or our eternal punishment is dependent upon whether or not we have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the prisoner. In Matthew 25, in other words, Jesus tells us that our good works are indeed part of the salvation that God has made possible.

For centuries, the theological debate has raged on, spawning hugely unfortunate extremes and unnecessary distortions of biblical truth. But in tonight’s scripture from the book of James, it is made crystal clear to us that debating over faith and works is something like debating over bloodflow and breathing. Which would you rather do without, the flow of

blood through your veins or the intake of oxygen? That would be a ridiculous conversation right? Because life depends upon both of those activities. In much the same way, salvation depends, according to Scripture, upon both faith and good works. They are both manifestations of God's saving grace, and they are both inseparably joined in the life of discipleship. Faith, without works, is dead. Good works, without faith, are random and unsubstantiated.

But be clear about this: We cannot earn our salvation through either our faith or our works. We simply do not have the wherewithal nor the righteousness to accomplish that. Salvation is God's accomplishment and God's gift, offered to us in grace. We will never earn it, and we will never achieve it by our own merit. We can, however, receive God's gift of salvation. We cannot earn it, but we can receive it (I don't think that I have to say much to remind you that there is a vast difference between earning a prize and receiving a gift.)

The God-given, Spirit-empowered mechanism by which we receive God's gift of salvation, is the mechanism of faith in Jesus Christ, accompanied by the good works that the love of Christ inspires within us.

The Greek word for faith that is utilized in tonight's scripture is a word that implies significantly more than an intellectual agreement or a cognitive speculation. In fact, the Greek word for faith is one that implies trust, reliance, dependable relationship. The kind of saving faith that Scripture describes, in other words, is a life-changing relationship with the living Christ—a relationship that changes us inwardly to such an extent that it becomes the joy of our life to bless others with works of mercy, not for the purpose of inflating our ego, but for the purpose of giving expression to the glorious and relentless love of Jesus Christ. That is why scripture is able to say with conviction that faith without works is dead. Because if our faith is not accompanied by consistent works of mercy and ministry, then our faith cannot be a relationship with the living Christ, whose nature is to identify with the least and the lost.

Return with me, then, to our foundational question: What is a disciple? The first biblical response to that question is this: A disciple is a person of faith—but not just any faith. More specifically, a disciple is a person whose faith is nothing less than a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and whose life bears witness to that relationship through the frequent rendering of good and merciful works.

Allow me to make this personal. Are you living with a faith like that? Is your faith something more than an intellectual acknowledgement or a name on a church roll or the half-hearted mumbling of the Apostles' Creed? Is your faith both a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and life that bears witness to that relationship through the frequent rendering of good and merciful works?

When I think about that kind of faith, I think of a woman by the name of Jane, who was a long-time member of a church that I once served. She was 82. When she was younger, she had served for many years as a missionary in Peru. In fact, sometimes, if she became

very excited about something, she would start speaking in Spanish, without even knowing that she was doing it, a language that was part of her spiritual DNA. “Listen to me, chattering in Spanish like an old fool,” she would say, when she recognized what she was saying. “Please forgive me, she would say, “it’s just that that language is very important to me. I have talked about Jesus to hundreds of different people in that language. Sometimes I even think and dream in Spanish, and it’s hard to keep the language out of my speaking when I get excited about something.”

Jane never experienced marriage. She devoted her life to ministry instead. As an 83-year-old, she participated regularly in the church’s ministry to both the homeless and the homebound. She served meals to the church’s homeless visitors and prayed with them, helping them to recover their dignity and their hope. She regularly visited people in hospitals and nursing homes, many of whom were younger than she was. She talked with them and laughed with them. She held their hands and prayed with them, helping them to remember that they were still precious members of the Body of Christ.

On Tuesdays, Jane met weekly with her covenant discipleship small group. On Wednesdays, she would help to set up the sanctuary for the weekly healing service, which she attended each week. After the healing service, Jane attended whatever Bible study the church was holding at the time, sharing her insights about Scripture with an urgency that led me to believe that she had been reading and studying Scripture for a long, long time.

One night, at a Bible study, I said to her, “Jane, I’m so inspired by your willingness to study Scripture when you’ve probably been reading it a lot longer than any of us.”

“Don’t be too impressed,” she said. “After all, how arrogant would I have to be to think that my faith is so complete that I don’t have to search any more for God’s word in Scripture?”

“Jane,” I said. “Do you really believe that you have an incomplete faith?”

“Well,” she said, “think about it this way: Is any marriage complete? Is any friendship complete? Is any parent-child relationship complete?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Of course not,” she said. “Relationships are always growing. And the minute we think that the relationship is complete, we stop working on it and take it for granted.”

“That’s how I think about faith in Jesus,” she said. “It’s not just a belief. It’s a relationship. I’m going to work on that relationship until I die, and then I’m going to keep working on it in heaven.”

I understood what she was saying to me, I think. In her own inimitable way, she was helping me to grasp the biblical concept of faith—faith that is more than a set of beliefs

and practices; faith that is a relationship with the living Christ, resulting in a life of good works that are significant no matter whether we are 13 or 83.”

A few months after that conversation, Jane was taken to the hospital with a severe nosebleed. When I walked into her hospital room to visit her, there was a strange looking contraption jammed into her right nostril, and Jane was giggling like a schoolgirl in her hospital bed.

“Jane,” I said, “what’s so funny?”

“Oh, I better not tell you.”

“You have to tell me. What’s making you laugh?”

“Well,” she said, “I made a little joke a few minutes ago, and I didn’t even mean to do it. It was an accidental joke.”

“Tell me the joke.”

“The nurse was in here a few minutes ago,” she said, “changing this thing in my nose. When she pulled it out, my nose started to run. I thought that it was more blood, but when I looked at the tissue it was just clear liquid. So I said to the nurse, ‘Nurse, I thought this was blood, but it’s not [i.e., it’s snot!!].’”

With that she erupted into laughter, and I couldn’t help but join her. What can one do but laugh when sitting in the presence of an 83 year old woman making snot jokes?!

On my way out of the hospital that day, that very nurse told me that, during her shift, Jane had visited each hospital room on that floor, introducing herself to the other patients. “You know,” the nurse said to me, “Mr. Jacobs in room 412 is dying of pancreatic cancer. He said to me this afternoon, ‘Who’s the weird lady with the nosebleed who came to visit me today?’ ‘Her name’s Jane, Mr. Jacobs?’ ‘Well she prayed with me, and I liked it. Do you think you can ask her to come back and pray with me again?’

“Tell me, Reverend,” the nurse said to me, “what makes that woman tick?”

What makes Jane tick? I think I know. It’s faith. Biblical faith. Faith that is more than a set of beliefs and practices; faith that is a relationship with the living Christ, resulting in a life of good works that are significant no matter whether we are 13 or 83.

A disciple, according to Scripture, is someone who lives with that kind of Spirit-empowered combination of faith and good works. Never separate them too far from one another. Because they belong together.

Here’s my question: Are you a disciple, living in a growing faith relationship with Jesus Christ, and manifesting his love in tangible acts of mercy and ministry?

This weekend, as we rally together around the ministry of the church, my prayer is that we will rededicate our lives to that kind of vibrant faith accompanied by joyful good works. If I seem overly emphatic about this, please understand: The depth of our discipleship depends upon it.

