

James 1:19-27—August 29, 2021

## ACTIVE FAITH

“Do not merely listen to the Word—God’s Word—and so deceive yourselves,” writes James. “Do what it says.”

Imagine what faith communities like ours would look like, and how much more Christ-like those communities would be, if church members didn’t merely listen to what Jesus had to say, but actually did what Jesus told them.

We could start by following two simple teachings of Jesus. The first one is, “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your strength, and all of your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

And the second one is *the Golden Rule*: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

Those two teachings of Jesus, very simple and straightforward, are enough to get us up out of our pews and keep us busy being Christ’s disciples for our entire lives.

A few years ago I was listening to a church service on the radio that was being broadcast from the historic Park Street Church in Boston.

The preacher told a story about a minister who was visiting a small town in the southern part of the United States.

This minister stopped into a little restaurant, ordered a cup of coffee and sat on a stool at the counter, just letting his mind wander.

The coffee shop was basically empty, and the pastor was enjoying his solitude when a Sheriff’s Deputy walked into the place and sat next to him.

The minister suspected right away that the deputy probably wanted to “check out” the stranger in town because he had his choice of plenty of other empty seats, but he chose to sit on the stool next to him.

And sure enough, the deputy began a friendly inquiry.

“What’s your name?”

“Where are you from?”

“Where are you heading to?”

“Are you visiting anyone here in town?”

The minister answered all the deputy’s questions, then decided that he wanted to take control of the conversation now. So he looked at the deputy’s holster, pointed to what looked like an aerosol can, and asked, “What’s that?”

“Oh,” said the deputy, “that’s a can of mace.”

Now the minister knew very well what mace was, but he decided to ask another question anyway.

“What does it do?”

“Well,” the deputy said, “I’ve never used this stuff in a real incident, but I’ve had some training in what to do with it.”

He pulled the can of mace out of the holster, held it up for the minister to get a closer look at, and said, “This is my first line of defense. If I encounter someone and they try to resist arrest or use force against me, I take this can of mace and spray it into their eyes.

“It isn’t fatal and doesn’t cause any permanent damage. But, according to my training, the mace will render a person ‘conscious but inactive.’”

The deputy looked at the minister and asked, “Do you know what I mean by ‘conscious but inactive’?”

The minister replied, “Deputy, I’m an ordained pastor, and I’ve served a number of churches in the past twenty-five years. I could write a book on ‘conscious but inactive.’”

“Do not merely listen to the Word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says,” James wrote.

In other words, don’t be a “conscious but inactive” follower of Jesus. Instead, we’re called to activate our faith and put it into practice.

Isn't it true that most Christians hear the Gospel just fine, they listen to what Jesus is saying, but for some reason that causes pastors to tear their hair out in frustration at times, their response to the gospel message and to Jesus' words and the responsibility it puts on them is minimal.

Even when they see a need, as Jesus said in the parable of the sheep and the goats, to feed the hungry, to give a cup of water to the thirsty, to take a stranger into their home, to give clothes to those who have none, to look after the sick, or to visit someone in prison, there's a tendency to do as little as possible to meet that need.

Those are the traits of "conscious but inactive" Christians.

I remember reading somewhere that the word "Christian" isn't an adjective that describes a person—as in, "I'm a Christian" or "He or she is a Christian."

Rather, the word "Christian" is a verb, an action that describes what a follower of Jesus does and how a follower of Jesus acts in the world, as in, "That person shows Christian love toward others the way Christ did," or, "His or her Christian faith reflects Jesus in the world because he or she is compassionate and kind and forgiving, just like Jesus was."

But there are different degrees, different levels of Christians-in-action.

And some followers of Jesus are more active than others.

Active Christians, when they see an opportunity to minister to others in Jesus' name, say to themselves, "Don't just sit here; do something."

Inactive Christians, when they see an opportunity to minister to others in Jesus' name, say to themselves, "Don't do something; just sit here."

When Christians have a "conscious but inactive" faith, nothing changes. There's no opportunity for healing or redemption or ministry to happen, so the world remains damaged and people's hearts remain broken and hurting.

If when we put our faith into action, people and the world can be transformed for the better.

A family is out for a drive one Sunday afternoon. It's a pleasant afternoon, and they relax at a leisurely pace down the highway.

Suddenly, the two children begin to beat their fists on their father's back. "Daddy, Daddy, stop the car! There's a kitten back there on the side of the road!"

The father says, "So there's a kitten on the side of the road. We're having a nice drive and I don't want it interrupted."

"But Daddy," one of the children says, "you have to stop and pick it up."

"No I don't have to stop and pick it up."

"But Daddy, if you don't it will die."

"Well then, it will have to die. We don't have room for another animal. We already have a zoo at the house. No more animals."

"But Daddy, are you going to just let it die?"

"Be quiet, sweetie. We're trying to have a pleasant drive."

"We never thought our Daddy was so mean and cruel, letting a little kitten die."

Finally the mother turns to her husband and says, "Dear, you'll have to stop."

He heaves a deep sigh, then turns the car around, returns to the spot where they saw the kitten, and pulls off to the side of the road. "You kids stay in the car. I'll see about it."

The father goes out to pick up the little kitten, who is just skin and bones, sore-eyed, and full of fleas. When he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit of energy the kitten bristles and hisses, baring its teeth and claws.

The father picks up the kitten by the loose skin at the neck, brings it over to the car and says, "Don't touch it. It probably has leprosy."

Back home they go. When they get to the house the children give the kitten several baths and about a gallon of warm milk. Then they plead with their father, "Can we let it stay in the house, just for tonight? Tomorrow we'll make a place in the garage for it to stay in."

The father says, "Sure, take my bedroom. The whole house is already a zoo."

The kids fix a comfortable bed, fit for a Pharaoh. Several weeks pass. Then one day the father comes home from work and is hanging up his coat when he feels something rub against his leg. He looks down, and there is a cat.

He reaches down toward the cat, after first checking to make sure that no one is watching. When the cat sees his hand, it doesn't bare its claws and hiss. Instead, it arches its back to receive a caress.

Is this the same cat?

It couldn't be the same cat, could it? It's totally different from that frightened, hurt, hissing kitten he picked up on the side of the road.

Of course it's not the same cat. It's different. It's transformed.

What is it that made the difference and caused the transformation?

Kindness. Compassion. Love. The marks of a conscious but active faith. A faith that's transformative. A faith that heals.

This conscious but active faith doesn't just work on kittens, you know. It also works on human beings,

If we will listen to what the Word of God says, as revealed in Jesus Christ, and then do what it says.

Thanks be to God. Amen.