"Habits of the Heart: Just Do It"

James 1:19-27 and Matthew 7:21-27

First Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

So is Christian faith better illustrated by one big act of love, or by small daily choices doing what Jesus would do? Big, or small? What do you think?

In his book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed,* Philip Haille writes about the French village of Le Chambon during the worst of WWII. Unlike most towns in France, the villagers in Le Chambon hid Jews from the Nazis, saving perhaps thousands of lives. When Hallie heard the story, he was curious about the people in the village. He wondered what kind of courage they had to do such extraordinary good. So he visited Le Chambon to meet the quiet heroes there. But what he discovered in interview after interview was their ordinariness. They didn't seem different than other French villagers.

But then Hallie began to discover something. He discovered the one thing that stood out, and united them, was that Sunday after Sunday they attended their little church. And there they heard sermons by Pastor Trochme. It became a habit, a life, and religious habit. And they encouraged each other during the week to do what Pastor Trochme had preached. So when it was time for them to be courageous and to do the right thing when the Nazis came to town, they quietly did.

One old woman, who faked a heart attack when the Nazis came to search her house, said, "Pastor always taught us that there comes a time in every life when a person is asked to do something for Jesus. When our time came, we knew what to do."

Indeed, big things do come up in life. It can be a bad report from the doctor. It can be a broken marriage or a broken relationship with a child. It can be a lost job or financial stress or the death of a parent or spouse. It can be a habit that becomes an addiction or government gone terribly wrong. And so often how we handle those big things is determined by the character that we have formed with daily habits of the heart. A bit of wisdom from my maternal grandmother was, "Get the small things right and then usually the big things work out." Practicing the Christian faith in the small things each day prepared the villagers of Le Chambon to get the big thing right when the Nazis came to town. Our habits shape our hearts.

This fall Bill and I will be preaching from a collection of Biblical books sometimes called "The Catholic Epistles." These are the books James, I & II Peter, I, II & III John, and Jude. They are often overlooked. They are writings about how to live the Christian faith passed among churches in the late 1st C. They are about creating Christian habits of the heart. Today we start with James.

II. Brief Exegesis

James is a bit of a strange book. There is nothing in it about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus is only mentioned twice. If all we had for the New Testament was the book of James we would not have Christian faith.

So for that reason, James is best understood as part of "the New Testament library." It is a book that is part of the conversation about Christian faith. Or, perhaps, better, it's one voice in the New Testament choir. It doesn't tell you everything, but it does tell you something. And what it tells you is the importance of the connection between belief and action, between faith and works. Or as James says, "Faith without works is dead" (Js. 2:17). James is all about following Jesus with a particular way of life. It's about connecting Sunday with Monday, connecting belief with action, connecting scripture with habits of the heart (as was done in the village of Le Chambon).

The three main themes in James are introduced in the section I read; Christian talk, doing Christian faith and care for the powerless. Regarding speech Christians are to be "quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger." It's a bit of life wisdom, and a challenge for some Christians. But in doing that we build character, affirm others, control our emotions, and say a lot fewer hurtful things. It also expresses a type of humility and builds community. Being "quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger" allows the word of God to be planted in our lives that produces Christian character.

Next the text addresses belief and life; "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (Js. 1:22). The connection between faith and life matters. In fact, the way of our lives shows what we really believe. If we say we believe in the grace of God, do we forgive others? If we say we believe God gives good gifts, are we generous? If we say God is kind, do we help others? If we say we believe God is truth, do we stand up for truth? If we don't, the text says it's like seeing yourself in a mirror and then immediately forgetting what you look like. Seeing the truth of God's way in the world should lead to a particular way of life and not be forgotten.

Those who "do the word" control their speech. Those who "do the word" live what they say they believe. And finally, those who "do the word" care for the poor and powerless. In 1st C culture, orphans and widows were the most vulnerable as they often did not have families to help protect them or ways to earn a living. As Jesus did, Christians are to reach out and care for those

who are outside power and prosperity. That's why we help feed kids and families through the Pantry Program. And that's why we host a Head Start program. And that's why we reach out to our neighbors in the lot on the corner of 5th and Fullerton. When churches are at their best they care for those most vulnerable in the community.

In the reading from Matthew, we hear something similar to James. In fact, some biblical scholars have wondered if the writer of Matthew had a copy of James, or if the writer of James had a copy of Matthew. Probably more likely is that both James and Matthew drew upon some of the same early church teaching about Christian faith. Both were addressing the issue of Christian faith and a way of life. In James, we hear it as a type of wisdom teaching. In Matthew it's a warning from Jesus about the importance of "doing the word" and the story of the rock and sand. The point in both is that the way of life matters. And that way of life is shaped by the quiet habits of the heart.

III. Brief Theological Reflection

Habits of the heart: "be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger." Habits of the heart: do the word. Habits of the heart: care for the poor and powerless.

Years ago, the Nike athletic shoe company ran their very successful "Just Do It" campaign. The idea was that when it comes to getting in shape there's lots of good planning and good intentions. Maybe there's even good advice from a doctor or friends or spouse. But then there are the busy schedules, the procrastinating, the excuse making, the waiting until tomorrow or next week or next month. And so there are good ideas and good intentions, but it never happens. There's no action. Nike wanted to cut through all of that and be the decisive, no excuse and action-oriented company. They want to get us into shape. Just Do it…Just Do It with Nike.

Just Do It…that's James. Christian faith demands clear choices, decisive action, no excuses, a particular way of life. It's about the habits of the heart lived every day. And that shapes a character and a way of life for whatever comes in life whether big or small. Christian habits of the heart; Just Do It.