

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from September 6, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

**“Don’t Just Sit There ...”**

Scriptures:

James 2:1-10, 14-17

Mark 7:24-37



Long ago and not so far away, before I even thought of entering seminary, even before I had children, I was visiting one day with a friend of mine who was a priest. Our conversation traveled all over the place as friends’ conversations usually do, until we landed on the familiar topic of the division of household labor. My friend served a local parish and he lived in the rectory with several other priests. (I told you it was long ago.) In the evening they divided the household chores among them, specifically the clean-up and dishwashing after supper.

Well, my friend was having difficulty with one of his housemates keeping up with his fair share. He told me, “He always disappears after supper into his room. He never sticks around to help clean up. And we can’t touch his excuse.” His tone turned to sarcasm. “Oh no, he can’t help after supper because he’s in his room praying. He gets out of doing the dishes every night because he’s praying!”

James reminds us in his letter this morning to fulfill the royal law of loving our neighbor as ourselves and he writes: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ... Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” And two verses after our passage this morning, he continues by writing: “... Even the demons believe ...”

And so this morning we are thrust into the classic theological tension between the role of faith and works. But not so fast ... At first glance, James’ position seems to be in direct contrast with what Paul writes in his letter to the Romans and what has come to us loud and clear from Martin Luther during the Reformation: We are saved by our faith, not by running around doing a bunch of works.

Yet biblical scholar Cain Hope Felder clarifies for us the types of “works” that Paul and Luther discounted when it came to salvation. Paul is referring to the external, empty rituals observed during his time which were performed meaninglessly while missing the bigger picture of one’s relationship with God. And 1,600 years later Martin Luther’s issue, among many, was with the preoccupation of accumulating a bunch of deeds and prayers and payments into a pile large enough to guarantee access to heaven. He strongly reminded us about faith in the Resurrection and God’s grace—we are forgiven through Christ’s death and Resurrection and our salvation is through our faith.

James in his letter is talking about the shortcomings of a faith which is not lived. And in our gospel reading this morning, Jesus is pursued by a persistent Syro-Phoenician woman, a non-Jew, who cleverly and boldly reminds him that her faith deserves action from him. And shortly thereafter he acts upon the deaf-mute, miraculously opening his ears and releasing his tongue.

I’ve been trying to imagine what Jesus’ ministry would have been like if he didn’t do anything.

For that matter, what if God had never revealed Godself in the human body of Jesus? But, instead, God remained sort of out there—a passive divine presence that we all believed in but didn't do anything? Imagine Jesus sitting in the synagogue preaching and teaching and even praying  
without going into the villages, into people's houses, to people's death beds,  
without feeding them, without touching them, without healing them,  
without frying fish on the beach, without spitting on eyes, and patting on mud, without turning  
tables over, without turning water into wine,  
without healing lepers, without rebuking demons, without breaking bread and pouring wine,  
without painfully stumbling and crawling up the hill to his death on a cross, a cross he shouldered and carried.

Imagine Jesus just sitting there 2,000 years ago and telling us, "God loves you."

My dear friends, we are one fortunate human race. God was not content to hang out around the universe loving us. God came here and lived among us and showed us how to live with each other. God took on a human body who walked and talked and touched and *worked* to reveal to us that, yes, God loves us beyond our wildest imagination, but that we are to *do* like Jesus. We are to visit and feed and walk and work for the good of our neighbors.

And here's the good news. When we do it out of love, it doesn't feel like work. How many times have we said that about some enterprise in which we're engaged. It's a labor of love. It doesn't feel like work. Our faith frees us up to just do it. We can dive in to whatever task God is calling us to do, without fear, without hesitation because we have the faith that God is with us all the way. And the more we do, the stronger our faith becomes. Oh, sure, we'll get tired and frustrated and overwhelmed by the enormity of our tasks, but when out of a love for God and God's people that makes us *want* to do all these things, it isn't work. It's joy, it's liberation, it's opportunity, it's a chance to take our turn to do what Jesus did. We get to work like Jesus did. Wow...

And more good news. Jesus is still here. Jesus lives. God is not only still speaking, but God is still working—in us, among us, through us, in ways we don't understand. Yes, Jesus, told us to go into our rooms alone to pray, and we need to do that, too, but I don't think we're called to just sit there. We need also to get up and come out of our rooms to meet Jesus in the faces of those who need us, whether they be as close as our own families, or our Sunday School children, or our youth, or our homebound, or the poor in our own community, or the devastated people on the other side of the world.

As we approach the Communion table this morning, on this Labor Day weekend, may our hearts burst with thanksgiving for a God who is alive and at work, whose presence is manifested in the grain and grapes and soil and sun and rain, which combined with the work of God's people, brought us this bread and this wine to this table in this place this day. Jesus said: Take this. Eat this. Drink this. *Do* this. Do this in memory of me. Amen.