

It's hard to believe this month has gone by so quickly, but today is the last week of my August sermon series!

This month, we are parsing out our church's new vision statement, which we adopted this past February.

This morning, we're going to explore how, "*We join together in faithful service and advocacy with the ongoing hope that we can make the world a better, more just, and peaceful place for everyone.*"

If you have been here the past few weeks, you might be growing tired of hearing our new vision statement.

Well, hang in there with me for this last week.

And if you haven't been here for the past few weeks, then this isn't repetitive, and you get to hear our whole vision statement!

While I am reading it, I invite you to listen for the portion in which we commit to faithful service and advocacy, with the ongoing hope that we can make the world a better, more just, and peaceful place for everyone.

So here goes, "*At the UCC Burlington, we cultivate a thriving environment, which empowers us to embody the beloved, diverse community that Jesus modeled for us, proclaiming that all are welcome, all are loved.*"

*We celebrate our colonial roots as we change, adapt and grow into who God is calling us to be.*

*We respect the sanctity of each person's spiritual journey and we are blessed by the gifts that each person brings to the life of the church.*

***We join together in faithful service and advocacy with the ongoing hope that we can make the world a better, more just, and peaceful place for everyone."***

So today we are focusing on that last sentence, which might arguably be the most important sentence in the whole statement.

It's the culmination of why we do all that we do.

The whole vision statement is full of verbs.

We cultivate, we proclaim, we celebrate, we grow, we respect, and we join together.

We do all these things because we believe that we can make the world a better, more just, and peaceful place for everyone.

If we didn't believe that we had the power to change the world, we wouldn't be here.

So the beginning of our vision statement is the what, and the last sentence is the why, why we do all that we do.

Now, ours is a congregation of doers.

If you have been around a while, you know this.

We don't sit well, but we do well.

We interact, we engage, we help, we cook, we support, we do.

Some churches have the 20/80 problem, which is that 20% of the people do 80% of the work.

I think we are blessed in that we don't have such a problem.

Most people in our church, if they are able, are involved in the life of the church outside of Sunday morning worship.

For a church our size, we do a whole lot, in part because so many people are involved in our various ministries.

We wanted this ethos of hard work to be in our vision statement because we believe that to be a Christian is a verb.

We must engage in service and advocacy to make the world a just and more peaceful place for everyone.

Just wishing and hoping for change doesn't bring it about, we have to roll up our sleeves, and get our hands dirty.

But the equally important part of this final sentence of our vision statement is the *why*.

People don't buy into what you do, they buy into why you do it.

Rev. Dr. King didn't say, "I have a plan," he said, "I have a dream."

Steve Jobs didn't say that he wanted to build sleek computers and turn over a profit for investors.

His mission statement was, *“To make a contribution to the world by making tools for the mind that advance humankind.”*

(“Mission Statement,” TheEconomist.com, June 2, 2009).

Our goal shouldn’t be to have heads in church on Sunday morning or to have lots of pledge cards turned in on In Gathering Sunday.

Those are great consequences of our actions, but our goal, why we do all that we do, is because we are committed to making the world a better, more just, and peaceful place for everyone.

If we keep our decisions focused on this goal, then we’ll find that we don’t necessarily to be in the business of ministry with everybody, but we do need to be in ministry with those who believe what we believe.

This is the change that we wish to see in the world, per the famous quote by Ghandi.

Whenever we are working to make the world a better, more just, and peaceful place for everyone, by the grace of God, we are being the change we wish to see in this world.

Now, I chose today’s scripture reading from the book of James because it speaks so appropriately to our values of living our faith.

The letter of James is attributed to Jesus’ brother.

His audience was the new Jewish Christians who were dispersed outside of Palestine due to persecution.

James, in no uncertain terms, tells them that what you *do* is more important than what you say, or what you profess to believe.

He uses the example of meeting someone impoverished and hungry.

If you bless them, but don't offer them food, your faith or your blessings are meaningless.

Just as the body without the spirit is dead, faith without living it, without actions, without works, is dead.

Meaningless. Empty.

Now, just to clarify, he isn't saying that we have to earn our salvation.

People have understood this passage to mean that people have to work or earn their way into heaven.

I don't think James is talking about heaven or reserving your spot in the afterlife by doing good works.

He's saying, if you believe in God, if you have faith in our God, let your actions show it.

Works are not the cause of salvation but the evidence of it, you see?

Here in our church, we believe that we are all beloved, that all people matter.

We believe that God is love and it's our job to embody that love in the world.

Our actions, or our works, our deeds, need to reflect these beliefs.

Otherwise, we're just blowing smoke, as they say.

Because we know these sacred truths, that all people have value and that it's our job to live in community with one another and make sure that all people are taken care of, we have to live that way.

If we didn't believe these things, if we just thought we were masses of carbon being held on by gravity to a rock that is spinning around the sun, and there was nothing more, that in the end no life particularly mattered, then I suppose whether our actions were hedonistic or altruistic wouldn't really matter.

But we believe more than that.

We believe that all people deserve joy and that it's our job to help alleviate the suffering of others.

We have the responsibility to make the world a better, more just and peaceful place for everyone.

The whole premise of this sermon, summed up into one tidy sentence is that actions speak louder than words.

We know this.

What we do is often much more believable, truthful and revealing than what we say.

James was talking about poor people and the church's response to wealth disparity and injustice.

Poor folks are the most vulnerable among us, and as Christians, James calls us to a collective responsibility for the needs of the poor, and he calls us to a collective prophetic stance against the excesses of the rich.

There is more than enough to go around in the world, but we can't all live like the 1%.

There's not enough for us all to live so opulently.

It's our job to put the needs of the community above our own desires, that's what working for a better, more just and peaceful world looks like.

It's not easy.

It means making sacrifices, giving time and money to others when you'd rather spend it on yourself.

But when those others have significantly less than you do, giving up some of what you have is the right thing to do.

That's what living your faith looks like.

Christianity has gotten a bad rap over the centuries for being hypocritical, adherents and leaders profess one thing and live another way.

People can sniff out hypocrisy from a mile away.

Our vision statement compels us to make sure our actions, our ministries and our values are aligned.

Our ministries are our “what,” those things that we actually do as a church week in and week out.

For example, worship on Sunday morning is a “what.”

Our actions are our “how,” how those things get done.

Sticking with the worship example, “how” are all the actions that go into worship, such as preparing and printing the bulletin, the lay leader and ushers and Joe and the choir and the coffee hour hosts and bakers.

So the ‘what’ is worship, the ‘how’ is the actions that make it happen.

And our values are our ‘why,’ why we do it all.

We worship because we have the ongoing hope that we can make the world a better, more just, and peaceful place for everyone.

That’s our ‘why’ and it should apply to everything we do.

Our actions need to be the how, they’re the moving parts of the machine.

Our ministries are what our actions produce, they’re the product of the machine.

But the whole machine runs because of our why.

Why do we carry out our ministries?

Because we are working to create a better, more just and peaceful place for everyone.

This is what people will resonate with.

This is why we are here.

This is our vision. Amen.

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