

Testifying Disciples: *James 1:17-27*

Norwalk Christian Church, August 30, 2015, 14th Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 17, Year B, Disciples Together Series Final

Over the summer, we've been on a journey we've called *Disciples Together*, looking at the various weird and wonderful practices that make us church. We began on Pentecost Sunday, way back in the end of May. That day, I read to you several statistics foretelling the doom and gloom of the church. Culture has changed, and the place of the church in our culture has changed dramatically. Church attendance is on the decline, and more and more people are choosing to identify religiously as "none" instead of with any particular religious group.

Yet, here you are. You have chosen to be a part of a church, because you believe that doing so is important and worthwhile. While others have placed their priorities in other places, you are here, committed to this community. Because you believe what we do is important. This is something worth celebrating.

Over the last few months, we have spent time celebrating our beautiful life together, as we've looked at all the things we do together as church, and how our life together has changed us and is changing the world.

I don't know about you, but these last few months have renewed my commitment to church, and my belief that our world needs Disciples together. This thing we are doing is so important, and we cannot give up on our life together.

This morning, we are coming to the end of our Disciples Together series, and as we do so, we are beginning a new series on the book of James, which will be the focus of our next few weeks of worship.

But our stop in this journey of being Disciples Together we have called, "Testifying Disciples". And I must be honest...it sounds scary.

When I hear "Testify" I don't think of us. Churches like ours don't testify. We're too dignified for that! When I think of "testifying", I picture someone standing up and shouting, "Hallelujah," in a holy-roller church, or standing on a box at a street corner with a megaphone, or on religious TV crying at the camera as they speak of all the ways God will bless you if you send \$25. At best, testifying is someone going door to door, talking to strangers about Jesus. And all of that. Is. Not. Us.

You won't catch us Disciples talking about our faith out loud. After all, doing so might offend someone! We would rather show our faith in quiet ways. We love that quote from St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words." And in our experience, words are rarely necessary.

That's why this text from James 1 is such a good text for us. "Be doers of the word," James says, "and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." We are doers!

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God...is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Now that sounds like church! Don't tell me about your faith; show me your faith! And we are good at this.

Just look at all we do together as Disciples. School Supply donations. Food pantry assistance. Coats for those in need. Donations to homeless shelters. Last week we had a group of 22 youth and sponsors packing meals for Meals for the Heartland. We support good works all over the globe through Week of Compassion. Every time we ask for a special offering for this or that special cause, you give, and give generously.

We are a church that preaches the gospel through our actions. We are doers of the word, not merely hearers.

But I wonder...I wonder. Have we become so good at showing our faith that we've forgotten how to speak about our faith?

At the Meals for the Heartland event downtown at HyVee Hall, there were church groups there, yes. But most of the groups were non-church related. There were Target Employees, and girl scouts, and other business and social organizations, all there to help those in need. The Governor even popped in to talk about how good this service was. What makes us, a church group, different from all the other do-gooders out there?

We had a box for the winter clothing drive last November, and it sat right in our church. But McDonald's and Gregg Young Chevrolet also had a box. What makes us different from them?

We are collecting supplies for our local schools, but Verizon gave out free backpacks filled with supplies to any child that came by. How are we different from Verizon?

James says, be doers of the word, not just hearers. But James was addressing a different problem in his day, than the problem we face, today. For James, his church was nothing but talk. They would hear the world preached, and talk about how good that word was. They would tell others about their faith and their church life. But then they would ignore those who were in need. They would testify that Jesus changed their life, but they would not do anything in response to that life-changing news.

That is not us. Were James writing to us, he might say, "Keep on being doers of the word. But, for God sake, speak about why you are doing these things. Has Jesus changed

your life? Tell someone about it. Testify to what Jesus has done in your life, then show the world with your actions!”

I'll be the first to declare, I don't like the word "testify", nor do I like it's cousin, "evangelism". There is so much baggage associated with those words, stories of people guiltting others with hellfire and judgment in order to save them. I don't think guilt or fear have any place in our relationship with God.

But we should not let other's abuse keep us from speaking. If others are speaking falsely of God's anger and judgement, shouldn't we be speaking all the louder of God's love and grace?

That's what Testifying really is: speaking of the way God and this life of Church has changed your life.

I don't know about you, but I think our church is something to be proud about, don't you?

We've said before, in meetings and conversations, that we think our church is "the best kept secret in Norwalk." "How do we get people to know we are here?" "How do we move beyond simply being 'the church beside the hardware store'?" "How do we get our message out, about this wonderful fellowship, and all it means to our community?"

I'm going to go out on a limb here...but I think the best way we get the message out is by telling people. We may be the best kept secret, but why are we keeping it a secret? If words not getting out, it's because we're not sharing it.

I think we've got the best thing going on. I love that our table is open to everyone--to believers and those who struggle with belief. To children and adults. To gay and straight. To rich and poor. This is Christ's table, not ours, and all are welcome. That's something to tell people about!

I love that our church knows how to surround people when they are in need. We are a praying church, through words and actions and prayer shawls. We visit when you're in the hospital. We call when you need to talk. That's something to tell people about!

I love that our church takes the Bible seriously, so seriously, that we struggle with it, and ask hard questions. So seriously, that we realize that no one person or theological viewpoint can contain all that God's word says. I think that's something to tell people about!

I love that our church supports our children and our youth. Anytime we have a fundraiser to support ministry, you give and give generously. You give of your time to

love them. You surround them. These tags we gave our children today is true: they know that this church loves and supports them. I think that's something to tell people about!

I love that our church dedicates 10% of all our budget to giving to other causes. We support the outreach of our denomination. We support our camp ground. We support local causes. But more than the 10% of our giving, we give above and beyond that--thousands of dollars we give to good works, and more than even that, we give of our time and energy to help those in need. I think that's something to tell people about!

I love that our church changes lives. Just look at you. Look at how Jesus has changed you, and he did it through the hands and feet, the words and actions of this community. This church has changed your life, and I think that's something to tell people about!

We have a story to tell! We have a testimony to share. It's time we share the secret. Yes, we are doers of the word. But maybe it's time we recover speaking the word. It is, afterall, a "word", and words must be spoken.

Who will you tell? Who will you invite to come and see what being a Disciple together is like? How will you tell them? Ask them in person. Tell them about your church. Do it on Facebook. One easy way you can invite people to church is to do it on Facebook. Invite them to "like" our church. Invite them to events we advertise on our page. It's not hard.

If Christ has changed your life, you have a testimony to share. You have a story to tell. Do not keep your mouth shut. Speak!

The song we're about to sing says it all: let us talents AND tongues employ.
Or, to put it another way, let us do AND speak of the good news.

Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again,
pass the Word around: loaves abound!
Amen.