

People should see good sermons in our lives.

That was the lesson I learned from my father and the other men and women in our community. It is the lesson I must try to put into practice every day.

—By Congressperson Jim Clyburn, Chairman of the House Democratic Caucus and the Democratic Faith Working Group



The Progressive Christian Witness

A Ministry of Pacific School of Religion

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THE BEST SERMON IS LIVED

IN THE SMALL TOWN OF SUMTER, South Carolina where I grew up, few people used the words morality and values to describe a person's character or their religious faith. Instead, the men and women of my community lived simple lives of faith and community service; practicing the mandates established by Jesus Christ, they tended to the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40). These Christians fed the hungry, sheltered the impoverished and gave clothes and shoes to those who had neither. They seldom hesitated to share what little they had. They understood the true meaning of Christian morality and values. To be a follower of Christ is not to sit in judgment on people's souls and actions. Instead---as the scriptures teach-- -a Christian's greatest commandment is to love one's neighbor as one loves oneself (Luke 10:27).

My father, a fundamentalist minister, taught us those lessons when my brothers and I were very young. He never told us to read the Bible. Instead, he established a simple mandate. We were required to recite a Bible verse every morning before breakfast. We were not allowed to repeat the same verse twice and he took "Jesus wept" off the table at the outset. It was through that process that my life became immersed not only in the words of the Bible, but also in how those words should be put into practice.

When I matriculated at South Carolina State College in Orangeburg, South Carolina, I fully expected to follow in my father's footsteps. However, I soon became passionately involved in civil rights activities and began to feel that other pursuits might be more conducive to what I wanted to accomplish. It was the 1960s and many in my generation were determined to confront the injustice and discrimination that seemed to inundate our society. Near the end of my junior year I became convinced that the ministry was not the arena of public service I wished to enter. And so, I traveled home to inform my father of my decision.

The distance between the towns of Orangeburg and Sumter is about 55 miles. On that particular day, though, it took me about 4 hours to make that drive. I found my father outside working in his garden and when I told him of my decision, he broke his silence with these words, "Well son, I imagine the world would rather see a sermon than to hear one." That admonition became a guiding principle for my life as a public servant.

Those same principles resonate in James' epistle. I often tell people that James is my favorite book in the Bible. One of the reasons is quite obvious; James is my given name. But there is something even more significant about this text. Describing himself as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," James was not only Jesus' brother, but also a respected member of the early Christian church. As a leader of the Council

of Jerusalem and an esteemed contemporary of Peter and Paul, James had great influence over the burgeoning Christian community. As you can imagine, there was much discussion amongst the followers of Jesus over what it meant to be a Christian. For many, the expression of faith was sufficient but James saw it differently. He opined that faith requires much more than mere words.

James writes, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:14-17). James' text provides the spiritual blueprint for the early church, reminding them that professions of faith are incomplete without actions of faith.

It is not enough to talk about the poor, the hungry, or the needy. We as people of faith are charged to do more. We cannot allow the forces of hate, apathy, and exclusion to deter us. Our work must complement our faith.

Ending poverty, providing a livable wage, improving education, protecting the environment, and fighting for social and economic justice are all faith-based issues. They are grounded in morality and family values. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?"