

TELL It!
James 2:14-18
Oct. 2, 2011
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When I lived in the Washington, D.C. area right after high school, I worked afternoons at a doctor's office in Springfield, Va. This was the height of my pre-Christian days, so I didn't have much use in my life for religion. There was a group of nurses who worked there that I really liked. I called them "The God Squad" because they were all so religious and not afraid to tell you so. There was Burma and Regina, but Janice, she was the ringleader. At least once a week she would ask me, "Kory, do you know Jesus Christ?" And I'd say, "No, but if you hum a few bars..."

The God Squad lived their faith in very public ways. As their co-worker, I never had to wonder about the strength of their beliefs. I'd say, "Janice, the coffee's ready." She'd say, "Praise the Lord, the coffee's ready!" I'd say, "OK, you get the decaf today."

If our network went down, they'd have a laying on of hands on my computer.

I had a lot of fun teasing them about their faith, but there was an unspoken part of me that admired them, because they were able to believe in something I couldn't. They had something, this faith, that seemed wonderful, that really made a difference in their lives, and I secretly longed for the same thing. I often thought about asking Janice more seriously about her faith.

Until one day on the drive home from work. In the D.C. area, because of the high volume of traffic, they have special lanes called High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes, or HOV lanes. They were like express lanes, but they were right next to the regular lanes without any barrier separating them. You had to have at least three people in your car to use the HOV lanes. This was supposed to promote carpooling, but all it did was make it very tempting for people to sneak into the HOV lanes. These lanes were so coveted that people would put blow-up dolls in their car to make it look like they had three people in there. The fines for illegally using the HOV lanes were steep; I couldn't believe I had to pay \$75! The policeman who pulled me over asked me why there weren't three people in my car, and I told him my blow-up dolls had sprung a leak. He didn't appreciate my comedic sensibilities.

Anyway, I was on the way home one night - in the regular lanes - when I saw a car with one person in it come flying up the HOV lane. And I thought to myself, "Who would have the nerve to use the HOV lane illegally?" This was after my ticket, by the way. And I couldn't believe it when I saw the driver of the car was Janice! She zoomed by me, smiling, probably singing along to some Bill Gaither song. As she passed me and I caught a glimpse of her "Honk if you love Jesus" bumper sticker, I was infuriated! Here's a lady who claimed to be a Christian, who wasn't afraid to confront me about my lack of belief, and she was blatantly breaking the law! Christians weren't supposed to break the law. They were supposed to use the regular lanes and always say "thank you" and return the \$20 bill that fell out of your pocket. After that I had no desire to talk to Janice about God.

You know, that's the number one complaint I hear about Christians. We're hypocrites. I had someone once tell me, "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, then walk out the door and deny him with their lifestyle. That's what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable." That's what I found unbelievable about Janice's actions. Now, granted, in hindsight I was probably too judgmental of Janice. We all make mistakes, don't we? And forgiveness is a crucial part of our belief. But Janice made me

wonder: Aren't Christians called to a higher standard? Does our belief have any consequences for our actions?

That's what James is getting at this morning. He makes an important point about the danger of faith without works, and it's one to which we're all susceptible. I call it head faith. Head faith is an intellectual assent to a certain set of doctrines and Christian teachings without any corresponding change in one's actions. Head faith is simply a cerebral belief, and that leads us to presume that simply knowing the right truth or holding the right position is enough to make us righteous.

That tension between faith and works is also at the heart of our Stewardship Campaign, which starts today. The theme of this year's campaign is "Tell It!" with TELL standing for Tangible Expressions of the Lord's Love. We are not only called to believe but to live out those beliefs in ways others can see them. In the Crest and in bulletin inserts you will be hearing stories about how this congregation is taking God's word and making it real in this community. Through things like holding crosses and Vacation Bible School and Room in the Inn and our Mission Center, we are answering the call to be God's hands and feet in this world, putting flesh and bone on the words we hear each Sunday.

We do this, of course, not because we are obligated to do so. We are called to become the flesh of God's words because God's Word became flesh for us in the form of Jesus Christ. The greatest example of a Tangible Expression of the Lord's Love came to earth and dwelt among us, showing us how to love and serve, how the last will become first, how our hearts will be wherever our treasures are. That's the example we've been given and are then called to model.

We model it in how we treat others, especially those different from us. We model it in how we are in relationship with each other, especially when we disagree. And we model it in how we use the resources with which God has blessed us. As we look at these areas of our lives, are we being God's hands and feet?

At Crestwood, we are committed to this, and we back up our words with action. I'm amazed at what a great job this church does of being stewards of our resources. We have a Finance Team that is incredibly faithful and attentive in their work. We have a Property Team that works hard to take care of our facilities. We have Ministry Team chairs who devote themselves to their areas of work. We have dozens of people who come together to make worship happen each and every Sunday. We all have a role to play as we TELL It!

But to what end? As we come to this time of the year when we ask you once again to pledge to support God's work at Crestwood, how do you know your investment in God's kingdom is making a difference? I know a lot of people give to the church out of a sense of obligation or duty, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. But in a struggling economy, people are taking closer looks at where their dollars go and the impact their giving makes. Does your giving make an impact here at Crestwood? It's a legitimate question, and as a church we should be accountable for how we use the blessings God gives us, including the blessing of your tithes and offerings. So ask it: Does your giving make a difference?

Come here on a Tuesday night, when this building is bursting at the seams with Boy Scouts and the Cub Scout Pack, the Lexington's Men Chorus and Ministry Team meetings. Or talk with some of the people at God's Pantry who are supported by our outreach ministries. You could visit our Sunday evening youth groups, where we've been averaging about 54 kids ages K-12. Where would they go if they didn't have Crestwood? Have a conversation with one of our shut-ins who receive support and companionship through our Heart-to-Heart Ministry, or sit in

on a Sunday School class where people go to grow deeper in their faith and relationships. I could name a dozen more examples. Does your giving make an impact here at Crestwood?

We are called to continue that faithful work as we move into 2012. We are living into the vision I shared this past January to staff this church in a way that helps us move into the future God has planned for us. We've already called a Minister of Growth, who will join us in March and are working hard in our search for a Minister of Youth and Families. In the meantime, we're not slowing down as we reach out to do God's work in this church, this community and the world. We are committed to being Tangible Expressions of the Lord's Love, and even if we can't see all the ways that's happening, we can trust that our gifts, our time and our effort will be used by God in life-changing ways. We are making a difference.

A few weeks ago, as I was setting up for youth groups, a lady walked into the Mission Center, clutching her purse tightly to her chest. She was a bit disheveled and looking around as if she were lost, which is not unusual here. I asked her if I could help her. With tears in her eyes she said, "Do you all have any Al-Anon Meetings here?" I told her we did and we looked at the church calendar to find out when the next one was. She said she would attend. I asked her if she was OK and through her tears she said, "I've got to go somewhere. I've just got to go somewhere."

I'm so thankful to serve a place that gives people somewhere to go – for Al-Anon meetings, for youth groups, for outreach opportunities, for worship. Our giving makes that possible. Together, we have started telling a story, our part of God's story. I think we're still in the introduction, you know those pages that don't even have real numbers. We're on page VII. We're still just sharpening our pencils. What's going to happen when we really get into the story? What's going to happen when, with the Spirit's leading, we truly begin to TELL It? I get goosebumps just thinking about it. I hope you'll help make it happen. The world needs to know about God's love and goodness. The world needs somewhere to go. Let's be that place.