

Epistle Reading James 1:19-27, 2:14-17

word count: 1,598

Some of us who live in Southern California may remember the story of Larry Walters, a 33-year-old truck driver who, in 1982, decided that he wanted to embrace the world from a new perspective. He went down to the local army surplus store one morning and bought 45 used weather balloons. That afternoon at his girlfriend’s back yard in San Pedro, he strapped himself into a lawn chair, to which several of his friends tied the filled helium balloons. He took along a six-pack of Miller Lite, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and a BB gun, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when he was ready to land.

Walters assumed the balloons would lift him about 30 feet in the air, but he miscalculated. The chair shot up more than 16,000 feet into the sky and into the middle of the air traffic pattern at Los Angeles International Airport. Pilots from both TWA and Delta Airlines spotted Walters, and reported to air traffic control that they had passed a scared looking man in a lawn chair with a gun. Too frightened and cold to shoot any of the balloons, he stayed airborne for more than fourteen hours forcing the airport to shut down its runways and causing long delays in flights from across the country.

In the New York Times’ account, he came down amidst power lines in Long Beach causing a black out.

Soon after he was safely grounded and cited by the police, reporters asked him three questions: "Were you scared?"

"Yes."

"Would you do it again?"

"No."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because," he said, "you can't just sit there."

Today we have a guest speaker at our second service, a Buddhist monk named Kusala Bhikshu, who has been a friend of mine for many years. You may have seen him on a History Channel special on Buddhism, or read about him from time to time. He is an American Buddhist who fully embraces his tradition and goes to many places to speak about his faith walk.

He is here because some of you asked to hear from a person of a different faith tradition, but he is also here to speak with our Confirmation class after service, just as the class is finishing up. Soon, they will be asked to confirm their baptism and their identity as Christians. Today, Kusala will be speaking on “Zen and the Art of Community Service,” based on a Christian scripture from the Epistle of James that both Kusala and I found to have meaning for this day.

You may find this an odd choice—a Buddhist monk speaking at a Christian service, followed by some Q & A from our Confirmands. But, there is a parallel between our experience as Mainline churchgoers in our current Christian climate, and the difference our Confirmands will witness today in speaking to Kusala after hearing from another Buddhist several weeks ago on a field trip we took to a large Buddhist temple nearby.

As a group of outsiders, we wanted to know more about Buddhism, just as we have visited a synagogue, a Greek Orthodox church and (hopefully) a mosque in the near future, and want to understand more about these traditions as well.

Our guide at the temple often repeated the phrase, “I’m a lousy Buddhist,” whenever he corrected what he viewed as non-factual pieces of his faith, or things he disagreed with. He asked our young people if they knew the story behind the statue of the Buddha outside the temple. Most of our class knew, and one of them started to tell it—“There was a young prince named Siddhartha,” Andrew began. Our guide smiled, and cut in. He told us that Siddhartha was not a prince, and that his name wasn’t Siddhartha at all, in fact the whole thing is just a myth that never happened at all.

As we continued our tour of the temple, he told us of in fighting, of incorrect translations, and mistakes in architecture and even customs. We wanted to know, “What is Buddhism?” He wanted to tell us what it was not. He was earth-bound in his faith, and proved that the term, “factual fundamentalist” extends across the spectrum of faith and experience.

Today, our young people will be able to look in from the outside at the difference between a person who treats their tradition with veneration and respect, and one who does not, even displaying an embarrassment at being lumped in with others who have less difficulty in accepting the precepts of their faith. And this is what ties into their Confirmation experience.

Soon, they will be asked to embrace what it is about their own faith tradition that is true and just and declare that, “Yes,” they are Christians. They are Christians NOT because of what being Christian isn’t, but because of what it IS to THEM—what it means to embrace this way that will guide them in their lives. This choice will mean all of the difference to them in determining how they will continue to live out their understanding of faith. You have to be able to trust in order to soar a little and embrace your world from a different perspective. As Larry Walters said after coming down from the path of air traffic, “You just can’t sit there.”

I am every bit as guilty as anyone else is of having a hard time with how Christianity is portrayed and even lived out these days. I distrust people who wear their religion on their sleeve and declare, “I’m a Christian” as if it was a badge of righteousness rather than a path of servanthood. I am ashamed that there is an active effort to undermine science in favor of creationism, as if Christianity is a house of cards that would collapse if Adam hadn’t actually taken the fruit from Eve. I am angry that so many Christians need to have an “enemy” that they can label “evil” and fight so self-righteously against, such as the endless pogroms against homosexuals. In addition, I am in agreement with George Carlin’s statement, “Never trust anyone who mentions Jesus more than 300 times in a five-minute conversation.”

However, I can’t be stuck in my anger at what has been done in the name of my faith. That’s about them. It is not about me. What if right now, a class of young people from another faith tradition who knew little about Christianity came through our doors and asked us what it meant to be Christian? Would we rail against the religious right? Would we tell the story of the gospels taking care to point out everything that wasn’t factual? In other words, would we reveal whom we are or whom we are not, like the self-described “lousy Buddhist” who took his tradition apart in front of our own young people?

I am thinking about this today because we are asking a group of young people to finish their confirmation classes and say that, yes, they are Christians. If we ask them to do this, shouldn’t we be able to say why we can say the same for ourselves?

Martin Luther wanted to rip the Epistle of James out of his Bible. He called it the “straw epistle,” because it did not fit in with Paul’s teachings on justification by faith alone. James was reportedly Jesus’ brother, and this letter speaks to action in the world. Here is where you find;

“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” And, “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."

Isn't it true that our mainline traditions, in fact the UCC in particular, have a strong connection to this understanding? Isn't this way of quietly working in the world to make it a better place a very large part of what it means for us to be Christian, modeling as we do the example of Jesus and the desire to be his hands at work? I know that James expresses great truth for me when he says, "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."

As part of my own experience of working with this Confirmation class and seeing through their eyes what it means to be exposed to different faiths and other ways of being Christian, a mirror has been held up to me that shows me that I can only reflect the best that I can be through my own understanding of faith. Any anger or embarrassment that I may feel towards those who express themselves differently than I do will not (like the "lousy Buddhist") reflect well back on me. It is about who we say WE are, and how we act out our own understanding of faith that counts, and that includes learning to treat our own faith with reverence and respect. It may take us away to unexpected places and cause us to embrace the world from a different perspective, but as Larry the lawn chair guy said, "You just can't sit there."

James 1:19-27, 2:14-17

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

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.