

# Are We What We Do?

3<sup>rd</sup> Weekend after Pentecost

## SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY

June 16 & 17, 2007

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*James 4:13-17 (NRSV)*

<sup>13</sup>Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." <sup>14</sup>Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. <sup>15</sup>Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." <sup>16</sup>As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. <sup>17</sup>Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

*Matthew 11:28-30 (NRSV)*

<sup>28</sup>"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

*1 Peter 2:9-10 (NRSV)*

<sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

<sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

*Simple questions. Am I what I do? Am I what I have? For many of us, if we were honest with ourselves or even understand how we really view ourselves, the answers would be, sadly, yes. But these are merely two more identity thieves that blind us to the truth of we really are.*

We Americans are a pragmatic bunch. Always have been. Visiting the U.S. in 1830, Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "I think there is no country in the civilized world where they are less occupied with philosophy than in the United States. . . . The Americans have no philosophic school of their own." But that changed about 70 years later with the development of "pragmatism," the only philosophic tradition born in America.<sup>1</sup> The general "pragmatist" view was that something is true insofar as it works. The meaning of ideas lie in their consequences rather than in the ideas themselves.

Americans are practical people, interested in results. We believe in what works. After all, some say, look what scientology has done for John Travolta; there must be something to it. Never mind the whacked-out stuff about the planet Xenu, body Thetans, and the rest of it. If it works, go for it. Regrettably though, our pragmatism feeds our wrong-headed notion that our identity comes from what we do or what we have or even what people think about us. If we are focused solely on actions and results, it is a small step to seeing ourselves only in terms of those actions and results.

*Am I what I do?*

I'm not very good at social chit-chat. When I meet someone for the first time, I'm often tempted to ask, "What do you do?" as if that is a synonym for "Tell me about yourself." Of course, it isn't, but my MBA training shaped me into a pretty results-oriented, bottom line guy. I remember one rather poetic friend in business school who was shocked that after one year at Harvard, his first response to every problem or situation was to get to the bottom line. Harvard Business School is called the West Point of capitalism for a reason. In the business world, it is very tempting to see each person as a bundle of certain skills and experiences that can be put to work for the business. And once you see others that way, it becomes easy to see yourself in the same way.

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<sup>1</sup>In the early twentieth century, the philosophy of pragmatism came to full flower in the work of William James and John Dewey. James was a pioneer in psychology and wrote and lectured on the philosophy of religion and religious experience. If you listen closely to how many people talk about their religious beliefs, you'll hear the echo of James' pragmatic perspective.

The same problem is at work in our Christian discipleship. We know what God wants from us: to love God and to love neighbor, all the time, without fail. A simple idea. But we also know that every day we fall far short of this simple standard. We get impatient with others. We gossip. We get angry. And sometimes it gets much worse.

The truth for all of us is that if our identity lies in how well we love, then we will always be found wanting. If I am what I do, then I am lost; I will not always do as God would have me do. I will not be up to the mark. As Paul writes, “. . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

*Am I what I have?*

As Luke Timothy Johnson notes, today’s passage from James is about the arrogance of assuming that our world is controllable and predictable and then believing that our being is derived from our having. This is not only arrogance, it is tragic. Johnson writes, “And within this world, the bottom line of profit or loss is the only measure worth considering. The commercial apprehension of reality is the perfect expression of the outlook of ‘the world’ closed to God as giver of every perfect gift; success is measured by the amount of ‘goods’ (whichever they are) that can be accumulated.”

Jesus understood well the attractions of wealth and their danger. It isn’t that there is something wrong with the stuff itself. However, wealth can create a mistaken sense of independence, even from God. Wealth can breed greed, as the drive for ever more overtakes us. Wealth and all that it brings can cause us to find our identity in what we have. The writer of Hebrews warns, “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have . . . .”

### Community

Though community is one of the key images in the Bible, grasping the biblical understanding of community is very difficult for most Americans. But unless we realize that the biblical emphasis is on God’s people, we will have trouble reading Scripture well. Daniel Migliore<sup>1</sup> suggests that there are several good reasons for this difficulty:

- Americans are deeply individualistic and private people. We cherish our independence rather than our interdependence. We compartmentalize our lives into church stuff, home stuff, and work stuff. We divide the world into the sacred and the secular, when nothing could be further from the biblical view.
- Most of us are turned off by bureaucracies, including church bureaucracy. For many, the church ends up seeming to be a place of rules, procedures, and meetings, rather than a spirit-filled fellowship of Christians.
- Many Christians and nearly all non-Christians see in our churches a vast gulf between what we proclaim and our actual practices. For many, the church ends up being seen as a home for hypocrites.

*continued in the page 3 text box*

<sup>1</sup> Migliore, Daniel I. 1991. *Faith Seeking Understanding*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans

### *God’s own people*

But we are neither what we do nor what we have. The belief that these provide our identity is a burden we need not carry. As the psalmist sings, “It is God who has made us and not we ourselves” (100:3).

The Jews of Jesus’ day had a long tradition of studying God’s Word and of piety. They believed that this was the path to true wisdom, the way to really know God. Of course, such a path wasn’t realistic for the average Joe trying to get by day to day. How could he ever hope to know God if this was the path?

But Jesus had known God simply by living in God’s presence every day. He offered to everyone the opportunity to set aside their heavy “yoke” of obedience to the law, to come to know God by listening to and imitating Jesus. This “yoke” was easy and the burden light. True love and mercy always are.

Jesus also wants to lift burdens from us, including the burden of thinking that we create our identity. I am not merely the disciple who fails to love as I should, I am God’s. We are God’s. It is in God that I find my true self.

When Peter writes to the Christians, he reminds them that they *are* a holy nation; they *are* God’s people. Not that they are becoming, but that they *are*. We know that we fall short of living as holy people, set apart by God so that we might proclaim God to the world in everything we say and do. This is who we are.

### Community (continued from the page 2 text box)

Despite these barriers to understanding the importance of community, we are called by God to be his people, charged with being the light to the world, working toward the restoration and renewal of all creation. In the New Testament, there are literally dozens of images of God's people, the church. Migliore writes that these images cluster around four key themes:

- We are called to be *the people of God*. This image abounds in both the Old and New Testaments. Here are two of many examples. "I will walk among you, and be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev 26:12). "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9).
- We are God's *servant people*, called as a community into lives of service for Jesus' sake. These images reinforce the Biblical claim that we are not called or saved for our own sakes, but for the sake of the whole world.
- We are the *body of Christ*, becoming one body through our participation in one Lord, one Spirit, and one baptism.
- We are a *community of the Spirit*, filled with the gifts of the Spirit. We are charged with using these gifts to build up the community of faith and to be a good witness to others (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

The moral instruction in the New Testament is for the people of God, as a group, i.e., corporately. God's call for our corporate obedience is seen in Paul's letter to the church in Rome, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:1-2). Living within God's moral will is something we do as a community, as the body of Christ. As Richard Hays notes, we must hear Jesus' ethical mandate in *ecclesial* terms. We are to seek God's will not by asking first "What should I do?," but rather, "What should we do?" (p.197) This is the foundation for the relationships we have with others in the body of Christ.

## READING WITH HEART & MIND, JUNE 17 - 23

**Sunday, 1 Peter 1:1-12** What is the source and nature of Christian hope? How is this comforting to those who are suffering? Peter is writing to Christians who are being persecuted in some fashion. Persecution at this time was localized and wouldn't become empire-wide for more than two centuries.

**Monday, 1 Peter 1:13-25** Why does Peter begin his instruction with a call to holy living? What place does discipline have in the Christian life? What do you think Peter means by saying that the Christians have been ransomed by the precious blood of Christ? What does this image bring to mind for you? Bear in mind that this is only one of many biblical images of salvation.

**Tuesday, 1 Peter 2:1-10** Who is the living stone? Why a "living stone?" What does Peter's image of Christians as a "spiritual house" mean to you? What is the value of using such images to talk about theology? What do you think Peter means by "chosen"?

**Wednesday, 1 Peter 2:11 – 3:7** Why does Peter urge the Christians to live as aliens and exiles? What would it mean for us to live as aliens in our world? Should we? Do we? Why would Peter tell them to honor the emperor? What can you learn from Peter's household code, this long set of instructions to husbands, slaves, etc.?

**Thursday, 1 Peter 3:8 – 4:11** How might Peter's advice here help the Christians in their time of suffering and persecution? Are you ready to make a defense of your faith to others (3:15-16)? How can Christians do a better job of defending the faith with gentleness and reverence?

**Friday, 1 Peter 4:12 – 5:14** What do you think Peter means when he tells the Christians to be good stewards, trustees, of God's grace (4:10)? What are our responsibilities if God has entrusted his grace to us? Are you a good steward?

**Saturday, Psalm 100** Who made you? Whose are you? What is the appropriate response?

## Sermon Notes

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**Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.**

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at [sengle@standrewacademy.org](mailto:sengle@standrewacademy.org).

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

“I am what I do.” Perhaps the place to begin this week is to discuss what you think is meant by that statement. Have you ever felt that way? Do you now? Have you ever known someone whose self-identity was wrapped up in what they do? Do you think they thought about it that way? How does our American pragmatism help people come to see themselves as what they do?

“I am what I have.” Same here. What do you think this simple statement means? Have you ever felt that way? Do you now? Have you ever known someone whose self-identity was wrapped up in what they have? Do you think they thought about it that way? What would be some symptoms of identifying with what we have?

How big a problem do you think this really is among Americans, among Christians? What in our culture helps to feed the notion that we are what we do or have?

How would you advise someone who wants to break the hold that their work or their money has on them? In other words, how do we combat all the identity thieves that seek to blind us to the truth that we are God's, that in God and only God will we find our true identity?

The text boxes this week are about community. Why do you think that I chose this topic? What does it have to do with our identity? To the point – my identity and yours? Can we find our true identity apart from the people of God? Americans are pragmatic individualists, yet both of these can work against our understanding and embracing the biblical view of who we are and how we are to live. How can we put our pragmatic individualism to work for God, rather than against God – and do so within community?