

I Want to Be a Christian

First Congregational Branford

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Rev. Suzanne Personette

The letter of James is traditionally attributed to James, the brother of Jesus, and thought to be written somewhere around 40 years after Jesus' death. James wants his readers to mature in their faith in Christ by living what they say they believe. It's easy to talk the talk, but James says it's important to walk the talk!

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹Therefore 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. ²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But 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. ²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion 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.

Let us pray....

I first want to share something I so often think about you - how you come to church every Sunday - how grateful and humbled I am by your love of God and neighbor. I'm awed over your commitment to keep the Sabbath holy - not just because it's a commandment, but because it's in your heart. Your commitment goes beyond whether you're going to receive a good sermon or a so-so one. You come because you feel close to God here, and you come to hear again and again that no matter what is going on in your life, or in your church, or in the world that God is bigger, that a light shines in the darkness. You come *here*, even when there are so many other things that compete for your attention on a Sunday morning. Sometimes when I look out at you I can barely stand all of the love, the righteousness, the desire to worship. And I think, Lord, I want to be a Christian like that! Because, if I wasn't clergy, how much would I show up?

Which leads to the question, does showing up regularly for church make someone a Christian - or is there more to it?

Rev. Theresa addressed that last Sunday when she spoke of discipleship. She had been concerned through the week that she wouldn't be offering a *feel good* sermon, but they can't all be. As I say on a new member Sunday, *we hope you'll be comfortable here, and a little uncomfortable, too, because the gospel confronts us as well as comforts us.*

So, you heard the scripture, let's get to the confrontin'! Because... this isn't a club we're in, it's a way of life, one in which we turn from one way - talking and walking as it *pleases us*, and turn to submit ourselves to the Lord's way, talking and walking as it *pleases him*.

For instance, *you must understand this, beloved, be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.* However, the pressures of life's trials make us slow to listen and quick to speak - often in anger! Like the story about the man who kicks the dog when he comes home from work, not because the pet has wronged him, but because he has suffered trials at work. It gets even more serious when we take our pressures out on other people. Be quick to listen, slow to speak.

I think about times I come home from work - and *church* is my work! - and I'm short with Ken or Abe.... or, yes, the dog, too! I feel most badly about that one because he's so happy to see me, and I'm like, *Augie, not now!* It's one thing for our kids, who've had the pressure of being good all day at school, to come home and take it out on us - because they know it's safe to be who they really are!; but, as adults, we need to model *how to be* with loved ones after a long day. I have a 30 minute commute where I can prepare to be with my family, to ask God for help with patience when I walk in the door - and to be loving. I want to be a Christian - *at home*.

James believes those who've been given birth in Christ will begin to change their habits and behavior - on a daily basis. I don't really think we can just claim the title and not look in the mirror every day to see if we're trying to live into that identity. *How am I doing?*

How do you act when you're driving along a jammed 95, or standing in line waiting for a slow teller or cashier, or at home when your spouse or child is in a foul mood? I want to be a Christian *at those times*. To remember to take a breath, and ask to be given the peace which passes all understanding - because it comes - when we ask. I want to be a Christian.

The next part of James' letter has to do with being doers of the word, not merely hearers. First of all, here at FCCB, you *are* doers of the word - I've seen the doing at Camp Totokket, Take a Vet Fishing, Refugee Welcome, and so on. You walk the talk. So, yay.

But, there's some very serious and sinful deception around hearing and doing that goes on in Christianity... such as Christian leaders who have sexually abused or hurt people in some other way. Hearers, but not doers. And, while we put to rest an honorable Christian politician yesterday, there are others who go and sexually assault, have affairs, care little for those Jesus cared for, and who lie. Hearers, but not doers.

But, my friends! it's far too easy to talk about and judge *other Christians*. I could spend a whole sermon talking about *other people*! But, when we do that, we don't have to look in the mirror. What about me? What about you?

And, the truth is... it's not easy being a Christian - *this practice of allowing Christ to live in us...* to put *our* personality aside and let Christ come in and live. It is a **huge** undertaking. A lifelong one.

And, let's be honest, one in which we're never going to be perfect. And, that's all right. The kind of God we have forgives even the worst sins. That's another reason you're here today - because our God forgives all. You can try so very hard to be a Christian, but as the apostle Paul relayed in *his* letter to the Romans community, *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.* He asks, *who will rescue me?* Only Christ, only Christ can enter our heart, forgive us, and move us to try again. Precious Lord, take my hand, right? Only Christ can make us good.

How wonderful and graceful that today is a Communion Sunday! Everybody say, ahhhh.... Love, forgiveness, and beginning again are offered here.

And, now I want to say something about when we're the one who has been offended - because we're not always the offending party. Sometimes we're offended. I want you to know that being a Christian doesn't mean you should allow yourself to be walked on. When people yell at you, are abusive to you, when they say or do something to you that shows they don't value you, it is right and appropriate for a Christian to have boundaries. We teach people how to treat us, so sometimes we need to say, *don't treat me that way.* Be careful when you don't say anything. *Don't treat me that way. Treat me with respect.* Jesus told the disciples, if someone doesn't welcome you, shake the dust from your feet and move on - to those who *will* welcome you.

The bible has too often been used to keep believers in abusive relationships. *Turn the other cheek, put someone else's needs first, submit yourself to someone else.* no no no no no no no! If being around someone doesn't make you feel good about yourself, if they criticize a lot, yell, bully, you might need to consider shaking the dust from your feet. You are a beloved child of the Most High God.

You can say, *do you know who I am? Do you know who you are?* We are beloved.

And, now I'd like to close with an amazing grace story. It's hard and spooky, but worthy. We live in Essex and last February there was a murder/suicide 3 doors down from where we live. Two weekends ago the realty company had an open house. I was like, whose going to that?! I was walking the dog late in the day and I saw the agent taking down signs. I asked how many he'd had, and was surprised to learn that 10 couples had passed through, some who knew what happened. The woman who was murdered had the condition, we learned afterward, where you can't be in sunlight so she stayed in the house all day with curtains drawn. No one knew her, and no one really knew her mate, either. Ken and I believe the couple had an agreement for a mercy killing. I told the agent that the house probably needed a good smudging, part of a Native American ceremony, to give a fresh start, after all the darkness. The agent, *who had the nicest face*, looked at me, and he said, "I don't know, I get good vibes in the house." I said, "really??" He said, "yeah." I said, "maybe from prior spirits." He shrugged. He said.... "I think even from them - I just feel real good about it." Then he said... "we all have a hard time."

That really wowed me. Those two tormented souls, forgiven, set free, by a real estate agent, free to grace the next residents, *not wanting to leave darkness behind*.

We all have a hard time.

We can only try so hard.

Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn, through the storm, through the night, lead me on, to the light, precious Lord, take my hand and lead me home.

Until then, come and share the Lord - the one we want to follow, but who loves, and forgives us when we can't. When we can't. Begin again. Amen.

In Life Among the Believers

Hello to you who are watching us from home. Peace be with you.

- Our Flowers this morning are given by Rowena Gatta in memory of her father, William Tuttle.
- If you'd like additional care and prayer today, Stephen Minister Carol Rutt will be standing next to the piano after worship.
- Please join us for a cold drink and cookies on the lawn following worship.
- September 16 will be our Homecoming Sunday. We're asking our youth to bring their backpack to 10am worship to have a Blessing of the Backpacks. After worship we'll have a coffee house in Pilgrim Hall. Please see Theresa or me if you can help with face painting and hair braiding!
- Our Confirmation class this year will include 7-9 confirmands - so, that many mentors are needed - and we don't have anyone yet! It's a low commitment, high satisfaction service opportunity. Please contact Rev. Theresa if you're interested.
- I'm sure you've noticed the beautiful new garden on the other side of the CDC playground! The garden and preservation of a tree was the culmination of over 2 years of hard work. It took the church, a number of town officials, a local gardener, and the Branford Green Committee to make it happen. Thank you to all those who did - we're grateful to you for helping to beautify the town, and the church's property.

- In Our Life Among the Believers, we want to lift up the life of another church of believers that closes its doors today after 180 years. The Church of the Redeemer in New Haven's membership had decreased to 171, and they could no longer sustain the huge building expenses. Instead of pouring the remainder of their assets into the building they decided it would be more faithful to use them in other ways. Some of the congregation will become part of our Spring Glen UCC church in Hamden, and others will become part of the UCC-like First Presbyterian church in New Haven. We give thanks for the long and fruitful ministry of The Church of the Redeemer, and ask God to bless them and these two other churches in this creative and unifying endeavor.
- Rev. Trucksess will now give our invitation to the offering.

