

Stewardship As Love In Action

Texts: 2 Kings 5: 1-15b; Stewardship Handout; James 1: 22-25

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Monty Python's movie, *The Life of Brian*, is a hilarious film set in the time of Jesus. Brian is a boy who was born in the stable next to where Jesus was born, and as he grows up, his life has many similarities to Jesus' life. But he's not supposed to be Jesus in the movie, and whenever Jesus does appear, he's treated very reverently.

Brian gets himself mixed up with one of several groups of Jewish dissidents who are trying to overthrow Roman rule. In the scene we're about to watch, I hope!, the group is discussing their timetable for overthrowing the Romans, when word reaches Brian's group that Brian has been captured by the Romans and is going to be crucified.

What happens next is a comment on organizational behavior everywhere, including in the church. Let's watch:

(Scene where Reg and the group make motions for immediate action.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YawagQ6lLrA>)

I know that James, the brother of Jesus, couldn't possibly have been thinking of this scene when he wrote his letter, but if the movie had existed then, he might have embedded this scene in the epistle alongside his famous injunction: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only."

"Be doers of the word, and not hearers only."

If James were a character in the scene, he'd almost certainly be Sibling Judith, right, screaming out: "It's happening, Reg, something's actually happening, Reg! Can't you understand? It's perfectly simple, all you've got to do is to go out that door now and stop the Romans from nailing him up!"

Of course the group dismisses the call for action, and continues their discussion of their plans for acting. That is the hazard of groups. It is far easier to plan than it is to do. In the midst of this emergency, they continue to act as if they have all the time in the world.

For them, they do, but not for Brian. And that's the point, right, that the crisis has come, it's happening right now, and they have to take some action, to get out and do something. They

have to rescue Brian.

How they're going to rescue Brian isn't clear, but it isn't as hard as overthrowing the Roman Empire, and it's something they can get started on right now.

So often when we talk about our stewardship of resources and how we're going to use them, we look at the problem on a giant scale. How are we going to solve the problem of hunger? How will we solve homelessness? How will we take on the problem of racism in our society?

They're big problems, intractable problems, like overthrowing the Roman Empire. One small group, like Brian's cell in the movie, or like our church, isn't going to be able to do it. It seems impossible to do everything, so we end up doing nothing. We continue to discuss how to attack the giant problem, while not doing anything about the small instance of the problem that is in our midst, is happening to one of us, or to our neighbor.

But if we can get past the "talking about it" stage, there are small things that we can do that can make a difference in one life. We can go and rescue Brian, even if we can't overthrow the Romans. There's someone in crisis now where our intervention would help, might save a life.

We can't solve hunger, but we can offer a meal. We can't solve homelessness, but we can offer socks. We can't solve racism, but we can speak up as allies on behalf of people of color. We can start to notice things in our society that we never noticed before.

Too often I think we are like Naaman: Elisha the prophet tells him to get rid of his leprosy by doing something simple. "Go bathe in the Jordan River seven times."

Naaman is angry. "I've tried bathing before," he says. "It didn't work." He's waiting for something spectacular to happen, to show God's power at work through the prophet.

Listen to what he says: "I thought that for me, the prophet would surely come out of his house, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy."

He wants a magical solution. He wants a show. He wants spectacle, something big, like, hand waving, invocation of God, and then, *Boom*, that's it, God does all the work, the leprosy is gone.

Instead he gets told to take a bath. It's anticlimactic. It's a come down. "What? No."

We can be a bit like that, can't we?

"Please, God," we pray, "solve hunger." And God says, "Go give someone something to eat."

And we're like, "We tried that. It didn't solve hunger."

"Now," God says, "like Naaman bathing in the Jordan, do it seven times."

Okay, so it probably still isn't going to solve Hunger, with a capital H, but for a few people, it solved the problem of small-h hunger today. They went to bed with their bellies full tonight, one night. They are satisfied with what we did for them today.

There is a paralysis that comes over us when confronting problems that are too big for us, and, let's face it, most of the problems in our society are too big for us.

But there are small things we can do, things that don't seem big enough, spectacular enough, to be from God, but things that have an effect nonetheless. And that might be just what God is calling us to do now.

Now, taking action is much easier in normal times. The pandemic has added a lot of stress to our lives, just going about our everyday business. It's important that we act, but it's also important that we have a time when we rest.

Sometimes the land has to lie fallow for a season in order to continue to be productive. The land can get exhausted if it is in continual use without a break, and so can we. God rested on the seventh day, and established the Sabbath to make sure that we get enough rest to do our work on the other six days of the week.

So it's possible that God is calling us to catch our breath, to take stock, to reenergize, and to spend time planning on how we can do more little things better when normal times return. That may be where you are, where you need to be, and if that's so, that's okay.

A call to action can sometimes be a call to Sabbath rest if that is what is lacking. Changing your life so that you are more focused on what is most important is also an action. If the pandemic is making you feel overwhelmed, then maybe cutting back is the most stewardship thing you can do, so that you don't exhaust yourself for the future. Sabbath rest is also part of God's word to us, part of what we are called to do as doers of the word. Not always, of course, but sometimes.

Let me encourage you to listen to God's Spirit in your life, putting on your heart what God is calling you to do, so that you can be a doer of the word, and not a hearer of it only. It may be something small that you can do right now, it may be something bigger, or it may be taking a moment to answer God's call to rest and Sabbath.

But whatever it is, don't get overwhelmed. We're not taking on the Roman Empire. We're just trying to figure out how to rescue Brian today.

No action is too small, too unspectacular to be from God. A bath in the Jordan may be all that's needed.

My prayer is that God will guide you in how God wants you to be a doer of the word, and to put your love into action as stewardship for God. Amen