

“The Gift of Doing the Faith”

Prayer: Almighty God, still our worries and quiet our minds. Help us to set aside our everyday concerns so that we might bring our whole selves with our ears to hear your word, our mouths to praise you, and our hearts to be filled with your Spirit. Amen.

Sometimes when people come to church they have the idea that the primary purpose for those gathered is to learn about and talk about God. According to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, what you believe is not what you say; what you do is what you really believe. So, this Sunday ... we reflect on “The Gift of Doing the Faith.”

Jesus told the story we have read during the last week of his life. All of this happens after he had ridden the donkey into Jerusalem and after he had chased the merchants out of the temple. Jesus had gone back to the temple to teach and the religious leaders did not like what he was saying ... but even more they did not like what he was doing. The critics of Jesus ... the learned religious people, scholars, and frequent attendees of religious services organized to corner him.

To this questioning we find a rapid bantering back and forth. Jesus asked, “Let me ask you a question. You answer mine and I’ll answer yours. Who gave John the right to baptize? Was it God or was it John’s idea?” If the religious leaders had said that John was a charismatic personality, then the people who saw John as a prophet would be furious. If they answered that John was a prophet, then they would have to explain why they were ignoring John’s pronouncement about Jesus as the Messiah.

“Have you stopped watching *Desperate Housewives*?” See this is a similar kind of question. If you answered, “yes” ... then obviously you have watched it.

There was no good answer and so they conceded this round of exchanges to Jesus by saying, “We don’t know.” But the truth is that they did know and they were wrong.

As he often did, Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons. The father asked the older one, “Son, I need for you to work in the vineyard today.” The older boy stubbornly replied, “I don’t want to,” but later on he thought better of it and went and worked in the field. Not knowing this, the father sent his younger son to do the work his older brother has refused to do. Now, the answer from the younger son might have been, “Yes, sir, nothing would please me more than to work in the vineyard. I’ll be right there.” Two hours later this polite son could be pictured lying on the couch watching the baseball game.

Which one pleased the father, the son who said he would not work and then did ... or the one who promised to work and never showed up? This question is a no-brainer ... it is what each son finally did that matters. What got Jesus taken to the cross was when he told all those same religious leaders ... that they were like the younger brother. They were the ones who said the right things, professed beliefs in the right things, but who never *Did the Faith*.

Then Jesus looked in the eyes of the religious leaders and said, “I tell you, criminals and hookers are going into the kingdom of God before you.” What a thing to say to the religious leadership! Small wonder that on Friday Jesus was executed. Jesus had confronted the scribes

and Pharisees, not because what they said was wrong, but because they did not practice what they taught. They somehow had mistaken their convictions about God for obedience to God.

It is all about *Doing the Faith*.

We hear this story and we are on Jesus' side when he put down the self-righteous religious leaders. ... And some days these words of Jesus are addressing us. According to a recent poll, eighty-four per cent of Americans say that spirituality is important in their lives. When asked, "When do you feel your strongest connection to God?" Forty per cent answered, "praying alone"—and that is a fine answer. At the same time twenty-one percent responded, "I feel most connected to God when I am out in nature"—that too is a reasonable answer. Then another twenty-one per cent answered "I feel most connected to God in a worship service"—and of course, I like those people. Still a small six per cent of people replied that "I feel most connected to God when praying with others. Finally two per cent suggested that they were most connected with God when reading a sacred text.

No one suggested anything about *Doing the Faith*. Unfortunately we have come to believe that religion is something you think instead of something you do.

Churches are often long on words and spending more time discussing than *Doing the Faith* through the church. Congregations and church members assume that being a Christian is the same as living the Christian life. But do we not get caught up in that kind of an understanding where everything about faith is about how we think? It is easy to get our beliefs mixed up with actions. Churches are tempted to talk about the needs of the poor and never do the hands-on providing of care and resources. Church members like to agree on the importance of Christ, but never raise the questions that Christ raised to those in his world.

What God needs are people who will go where God calls them and do what God gives them to do.

It is all about *Doing the Faith*.

Maybe we have such good imaginations that we actually believe we have done things we have really only thought about doing. Have you ever thought about visiting a sick friend, rehearsed what you wanted to say, and then decided to send a card instead. Maybe you sat back in your easy chair and then offered silent congratulatory words to yourself for being so thoughtful. We believe in doing kind things, but sometimes we don't do them. We just think about them and assume it is a done deal ... sometimes I think that way and I wish I could do better.

It is all about *Doing the Faith*.

It is easy to create not only the outward appearance of being a Christian, but the inward assumptions, especially when we think about doing the right thing. The theological word for this distance between what we believe and what we actually do ... is sin, the sin of omission. It tears us up to think about doing something and then we never actually do it. It tears up our family, our friendships, and our church when we talk about love and act with indifference or even anger, or say "I'll go" and nothing really happens. If we are not careful, we spend our lives like the baseball player in the batting cage and never play the game; ... or study the cook book, but never enjoy the meal; ... or learn the lines in the play, but never see the curtain go up.

It is all about *Doing the Faith*.

When we first heard this story, we might have thought that Jesus just outsmarted the Pharisees. Nothing would have made Jesus any happier than to have the Pharisees finally understood the joy of *Doing the Faith*. Jesus wanted them to learn a better way, to say, “I need to stop thinking that holding the right opinions is enough. I need to start caring with my hands and my heart.” The Pharisees had gotten attached to their own ideas about what was right that it was hard for them to listen to Jesus. He suggested that they trade in their beliefs for a fresh experience with God, but they could not bring themselves to do that.

It is all about *Doing the Faith*.

Both of the sons had lied to their father and neither got it right. Even after we have said “no,” ... even after we have rejected God’s guidance with our disobedience, God still welcomes us. Jesus warned the scribes and Pharisees, and Jesus knew they were missing the fullness of life. The difference between talking about the Christian faith and *Doing the Faith* like Jesus ... is the difference between reading about the game of golf and playing the 18-hole course just north of Faith Church. The reason God wants us in the vineyard is that there is more joy in loving your neighbor than there is in knowing you are supposed to love that person.

We always have the possibility of saying outlandishly joyful things ... like, “I have some extra broiled salmon. Would you mind if I walked over a piece just for you?” Instead of nodding as we walk past a friend we can stop and say, “I hear you’re having a hard time in the demands of care for your wife. I’m coming this afternoon and let you get out of the house.” We can be the people who write notes, visit the hospital, and bring people to church who can no longer drive, and invite a friend to church next Sunday. Our congregation is filled with Christians who have figured out that the joy of faith is in the action and not in the words.

It is all about *Doing the Faith*.

William Willimon moved from being the chaplain at Duke University to being a Methodist bishop in Alabama in charge of 630 pastors. He found that most of what he had to do as a bishop was mundane and that lots of churches are boring. Willimon writes: “On one of my worst days, a grueling eight-hour marathon of appointments, I was about ready to go home when I was informed I had one more appointment.

Two older women walked in and one said, ‘We’ve come to Birmingham from Cullman to tell you about our ministry. Gladys’s grandson was busted with DUI. We went over to the youth prison camp to visit him. Sad to say, we had never been there before. We were appalled by the conditions, those young men packed in there like animals. We got to know them. Are you aware that only ten percent of them can read? An illiterate nineteen-year-old and we wonder why he’s in prison!’ The other one said, ‘Well, we began reading classes. Sarah taught school before she retired. Then that led to a Bible study group in the evening. We’re up to three Bible study groups a week. Two friends of ours who can’t get out baked cookies for the boys. We’ve also enlisted two wonderful nurses who help with the VD education. Some of them said those cookies are the first gift they’ve ever received.’

I asked the women with bureaucratic indifference, ‘And you want the conference to take responsibility for this ministry?’ Sarah responded, ‘No, we don’t want to mess it up.’

‘So you need me to come up with some money for you?’ ‘We don’t need any money. If we need something, we get it from our little church.’ I asked, ‘Then why have you come down here to tell me about this?’

‘Well, we know that being a bishop must be one of the most depressing jobs in the church—too many things that we are not doing that Jesus expects us to do. So Gladys thought it would be nice if we came down here to tell you to take heart. Something’s going right, that is, up in Cullman.’” (From “First-year Bishop” by William H. Willimon, *Christian Century*, September 20, 2005).

That’s what Jesus was trying to tell the scribes and Pharisees, trying to tell you and me, nothing is more joyful than serving God, doing good.

It is all about *Doing the Faith*.

Scriptures: Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32