

“DOERS OF THE WORD”

Matthew 7:21-27; James 1:22-25

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At first, the followers of Jesus were nearly all Jews. Those who were not Jews by birth became Jews in practice. The gospel was primarily good news for the oppressed peoples of Israel. In the book of Acts, just prior to the departure of Jesus, the disciples ask about the timing for the “restoration of Israel.” Even at that late date, they did not understand that the restoration was not about re-establishing the nation of Israel, but rather about the renewal of its faith.

Every time Jesus taught, healed, and performed extraordinary things, he held a mirror up for the people to see what faith looked like. The leadership had taken the faith and used it as a way to maintain the status quo, to hold on to their positions of authority, and to keep the peace. Faith had ceased to be about freedom and instead had become a vehicle for control.

The disciples, beginning at Pentecost, held up this same vision of faith for their fellow Jews. They spoke about the good news that was forgiveness, not judgment. They invited others into a new life founded on the resurrection of Jesus. And the community of faith changed. Instead of the daily struggle for survival, they began to share all things in common, giving to each according to their need. They stopped complaining about God having abandoned them and began to praise God for the goodness, grace, and love that they could now see reflected in the faith of God’s people.

But Jews were not the only oppressed people. The Roman Empire was an equal opportunity oppressor, and many Gentiles could see the freedom and hope embodied in the community of believers. And some became convinced that God welcomed these Gentiles. Others became nervous as the number of Gentiles began to grow. The question of membership requirements was raised. Did these Gentiles need to become Jews in order to belong to the community? You can read about the church’s struggle with this question in the fifteenth chapter of Acts. You would note that in answering this question, the community paid attention to the tradition, but gave greater weight to the activity of God and the spirit in their time. They listened to what Peter had experienced in the house of Cornelius where the spirit of God had come upon this house full of Gentiles just as the Spirit had come upon the disciples at Pentecost. They listened to the testimony of Paul and Barnabas and the eager response of the Gentiles to their message. And they decided that as long as the Gentiles respected the tradition of Jews, they did not have to observe the rituals previously necessary to become a Jew. They could belong to the community of faith as Gentiles.

One could say that Christianity was born when the larger body of Jews rejected this reasoning. Lest we become too proud of ourselves, I remind us that the church has repeated this rejection of others over and over again in its own history. Segments of the

church rejected the “lapsed” in the second and third century. These were Christians who, fearing persecution, made loyalty oaths to the emperor. From the early days to the present day, segments of the church have rejected people of unsound doctrine. It has burned heretics, killed heathen, tortured scientists, judged “sinners,” and denied women an equal status in the church. In the name of Jesus the church has practiced a faith of exclusion. And it has done all of this in an effort to discern between right and wrong

I mention this early struggle of the church over the question of welcoming Gentiles into the faith because it’s a good example of where faith changed its mind about the good. It’s the first instance of the church being not just a hearer of the word, but a doer of the word.

It’s tempting to look to the past as a time when right and wrong were easy to discern. And sometimes it is, but every age wrestles with understanding the good for its own time. Wouldn’t it be nice if the good were clear? Wouldn’t it be simpler if we could agree on the right thing? Can’t we just make a rule that applies to everyone?

Here’s the interesting thing: even if we could agree on the rule, it wouldn’t matter if we didn’t act on it. That’s what James is saying. Even if you hear the word and understand the good, you are not being faithful until you act on it. Paul writes in his famous love chapter, “If I have all knowledge.... but do not have love, I am nothing.” It’s the one who hears the word and does it that is building their house on solid ground.

Jonathan Foer makes this same point in Kalamazoo’s Reading Together book, *We are the Weather*. He says that even those who accept what we are being told about climate change, and accept that we need to take certain actions are no better than the climate deniers if they fail to take action. What’s interesting about Foer’s book is that he is telling us that it is our moral responsibility to eat less meat and that this is a new ethic that rises from the conditions of climate change. The large consumption of meat, particularly by Americans and Europeans, has necessitated the creation of factory farms that are as big a contributor to climate change as the fossil fuel industry. Previous generations consumed meat in a quantity that the biosphere could absorb. There are a number of reasons for this. There were fewer people and on average, each person ate less meat. Complicating matters is the fact that huge tracts of rain forest are being cut down to create pasture land for the meat industry. The point is that what we do depends a great deal on the context in which we live.

I came across this in Foer’s book: “It is written that ‘Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time.’ Why ‘blameless in his time’ and not simply ‘righteous’? Because righteousness and blame are contextual. Being a good person at Normandy on June 6, 1944, is not the same as being a good person in a grocery store in 2019. The Warsaw Ghetto demanded something different from what Superstorm Sandy did. Eating blamelessly two generations ago is not the same as eating blamelessly in the age of the factory farm. Just as a situation can inspire hysterical strength, it can also inspire, and require, an unprecedented ethical response” (p.192).

We don't like changing the way we do things, but sometimes a faithful hearing of the word requires a different sort of action. The teachings of Jesus are way ahead of us for the most part, but they may mean something different in our day. When Jesus tells his disciples that they are of more value than the sparrow for whom God provides each day, he's trying to reassure them that God will also provide for them. But is there something else we should be hearing in this age where the extinction of many bird species is rising at an alarming rate? When Jesus taught them to love their enemies, he was talking about the Roman oppressor. But what would it mean to love the enemy in an age where we are taught to fear the stranger, reject the refugee, protect the border, and threaten reprisals against those who disagree with us? What does it mean for us when Jesus says to his disciples that no one can serve God and money? How do we mitigate the influence of money in our business and political decisions? Is there a way to bring an ethical vision to the economic practice of maximizing profit?

How do we go about "doing the word" in an age where "hearing the word" is so difficult? Maybe we could begin by doing what Jesus was doing and doing what the early church was engaged in and what some in the church have been practicing in every age. Maybe we could be about renewing the faith, restoring the community of God's people. Maybe we need to remember that this is God's world, not ours; that faith was about all life, not just religion; that Jesus was about the whole self, not just the soul.

Maybe we need to do love and not just talk about it. Love God the creator by restoring the earth: lessening our carbon footprint, taking pleasure in the natural world, advocating for cleaner water, more breathable air, pumping fewer toxins into the ground, practicing sustainable agriculture, buying local.

Maybe we need to be better about loving our neighbor: building bridges not walls, feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, advocating for affordable housing, pushing for treatment over prison, building communities of support, not citadels of isolation.

Doers of the word are not people without the word, but people who remember the word as they walk through life. They remember the word as they encounter those in need. They remember the word as they practice faith in the work place. They remember the word in the voting booth, around the dinner table, and in the marketplace.

Doers of the word are active listeners. They come to worship as they are able. They engage in conversation around the teaching of Jesus. They spend time in prayer and personal reflection. They do all these things, but then they remember God when they listen to the news and as they go about their daily tasks.

We are doers of the word. This is who we are in Christ. Sometimes we are good at forgetting or excusing. Issues are complicated. Just gathering the facts may seem overwhelming. But in the end, once we've listened, and gathered and reflected, we will know at least one right thing to do. We will know at least one thing that pleases God. We will discover at least one thing that is an act of love. And we will do it. Every time we do the word, we renew faith, we redeem life, we restore the world, and we affirm the love of

God. Mary Oliver asks in her poem, *The Summer Day*, the important question: “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” This is the question of our faith as well: “What is it you plan to do?” Amen.

Foer, Jonathan Safran. *We are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux: New York, NY. 2019.

Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems*. Beacon Press: Boston MA, 1992.