

THE GENIUS OF DOING¹

Today's lesson offers us an exquisitely simple, but deeply challenging, message. Our Lord prefers faithful, concrete action over agreeable talk. Even if our words and attitudes openly reject God, obedient activity always wins the day. Jesus pays more attention to our hands than to our heads.

The first Gospel, the Gospel According to Matthew, is big on what we do. It's the only one of the four gospels with a Sermon on the Mount, which is packed with specific teachings on how actually to behave as a Christian. It is Matthew who keeps returning to this theme of the importance of actually putting into practice the ideas of Christian faith. Many will call me 'Lord, Lord,' says Jesus in Matthew alone, but only those who get physical and concrete and actually do Christ's commandments will enter the Kingdom.

I keep thinking of the concept of incarnation. Isn't it interesting that at the very core of our faith is this idea of God coming down as a particular person in a specific place on a certain date, and walking around and doing things in this world. God didn't come as a book or a philosophy of life. Curiously, God gave people a words and a book in the first covenant or Old Testament and his work with Israel. But at the zenith of God's

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intervention in this world he came in flesh and blood.

Incarnation says a lot about the nature of our faith.

Basically, what our lesson is saying is that our faithfulness also needs to get down to specifics—it needs to be like Jesus. It needs to act in specific places and times. It has to be incarnational.

Nobody knows better than I do how easy it is for Christian faith to become a matter of ideas or feelings only. The ideas can be so interesting and complex and engaging that there is no time actually to do anything.

I saw a joke that showed a bunch of Presbyterians or whatever—anyway, this crowd reached a fork in the road. The sign pointing one way simply read, "Heaven." The sign pointing the other way read, "Discussion about heaven." Everybody seemed to be going to the discussion.

Our lesson this morning moves us down out of the ionosphere onto the firm ground of 'just does it.' Jesus makes bracing comment toward the end of our lesson that tax collectors and sinners go into the kingdom first because somehow they have managed to begin to do what is asked of them. They have heard the gospel and have responded by making changes in their lives. The religion leaders and leading citizens have thought about and talked about Jesus. Maybe they've appreciated his point of view

or maybe they pigeonholed his theology. But nothing real has actually happened with them.

As I pondered our lesson today my thoughts drifted back to a classmate of mine in our pastoral counseling seminar. Her name was Beverly and she and her husband were co-pastors of a church located in the midst of the housing projects in West Dayton. Their church didn't belong to a denomination. In fact, their church belonged to them. Beverly and her husband took their life savings and entire retirement savings and bought a vacant lot and put up a building and started a church. Beverly's theological education consisted of a few weeks in a Bible college. Now the blunt truth is that Beverly and I and Beverly's church and the church I served were very, very different.

As I got to know Beverly and the work she was doing I had a very real sense of the embarrassment of riches. For her, doing class work with other ministers was intimidating and challenging. The reading and writing and discussions were for me more of what I've spent my entire adult life doing. What struck me most about Beverly was the staggering power of her ministry. Every week addicts, ex-offenders, welfare moms, drifters, and gang members would come to Beverly's church and have powerful encounters with Jesus Christ. Beverly's life was a daily spiritual triumph over violence and poverty. And

through her flowed an immense spiritual power. She couldn't name the various schools of psychology or articulate a coherent theology of the church or the scriptures. But broken lives were coming back together. She was someone who was just doing it. And I'm convinced that Christ smiles upon her for it.

The Persian poet Rumi has a line that goes like this: "In the resurrection our bodies will testify against us." Below our necks more than above them will be the measure of our lives. Have you and I been more faithful with our hands or our brains? Jesus tells us in our lesson which we ought to pay attention to.

And that's what he paid attention to. Isn't it interesting that when Jesus went into his most important work, his passion and suffering and death, he said practically nothing. He instead offered his body. The work of the Savior that defeated evil was shockingly physical, specific, tangible, and earthy. When God is most intensely Godself he is all action. If we would be his students we will be doers of his will not hearers and thinkers only.

So I ask myself the question you may wish to ask yourself. What am I doing? If they persecuted Christians would there be enough evidence to convict me? I may have the theology just right. The feelings just right. I may have gospel music on the stereo. But where have I gone with it? Have my hands been in the work of making our community or just neighborhood a better

place? Does one more person see convincing evidence in my life to have greater respect for the gospel? Have I had a change of heart about a way that I have been contributing to what's wrong in the world and resolved to act differently? Is there real prayer time, Bible time, worship time, time alone with God or are these actions that I don't actually do but approve of? Is there less loneliness, confusion, or despair, because of me? Am I trying, however ineptly, to be incarnational?