

Hearers and Doers

Matthew 7:24-29 James 1:22-25
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The first time I met all of you, as a congregation, was about 4 months ago on February 3, when I preached my candidating sermon and you voted to call me as your pastor. It happened to be Transfiguration Sunday that particular day – the mountaintop story where 3 of Jesus' disciples witness Jesus being transformed to a dazzling white, flanked by the great law-giver, Moses, and the great prophet, Elijah.

You may recall that in that story Peter wanted to immediately jump into action and *do* something. Yet a voice from heaven declares that the disciples should pause and simply *listen* to Jesus. In that sermon I stated, "Unlike Peter who felt he had to immediately *do* something after experiencing the presence of God, we are reminded that sometimes the best response is to simply stand in awe. Yes, there's a time to act, but there's also a time for us often over-achievers to pause in humble worship when we find ourselves in God's presence."

I also quoted Stan Ott, the founder and national leader of the Acts 16:5 Initiative, "We need to be the people of God before we can do the work of God. Hence, the title of that sermon: *Don't Just Do Something, Stand There*."

I bring this all up this morning because in essence today's scripture passages remind us of the flip side of relishing the occasional mountaintop experience of God's presence – the going back down into the valley where the people are and ministry is carried out.

In other words, I could have entitled today's sermon: *Don't Just Stand There, Do Something*.

We are being taught in today's Gospel lesson that there is a very big difference between paying lip-service to something and really living it out. Jesus brings attention to something that we still witness today, that there are many people around who say that they are followers of Jesus, but whose lives do little to show they are. Using language a bit more familiar in the Southern Baptist tradition, Jesus reminds us of the difference between talking the talk, and walking the walk.

Yes, what we say and what we believe are indeed important – but ultimately not if we aren't putting those words and beliefs into action.

Jesus' warning about those who simply hear what he teaches without doing what he teaches comes at the very end of the Sermon on the Mount. This is the conclusion of three full chapters in Matthew, Matthew's collection of

Jesus' teachings on what discipleship means, and what it means to be a part of the kingdom of God.

This Sermon on the Mount concludes with the parable of the two builders. I think it's safe to assume that Jesus could most likely speak with authority about building houses. As any good architect knows, however, **the first principle of construction is to build your structure on a solid foundation. A strong foundation makes it much more possible for a structure to survive terrible storms.**

We will have the opportunity to witness this first hand, in fact, beginning in the coming month here at College Hill, when (after a few delays) **we will begin construction on a church elevator, and then a new parking lot.** The contract has been signed and we're simply waiting for the city permits in order to begin construction. [Much applause from the congregation.]

In order for that elevator to stand strong, it's not just going to be set on top of the ground. That would be foolish. Instead a reinforced concrete foundation going more than 7 feet deep into the ground will be laid first. That would be wise.

Jesus, likewise, tells the story of wise and foolish builders. **And what makes one wise and the other foolish is not the building that is built, but rather the foundation that it is built upon.** One builds a house on a solid rock foundation, the other builds on sand, which is susceptible to shifting and even eroding away. Noting the number of foundation repair commercials on local television, that is evidently somewhat of a problem here in Tulsa.

The results of building a house on these two different kinds of foundations are revealed when the rain falls, and floods come, and the winds blow and beat against those houses. Put most simply, one house stands firm, while the other house falls.

It is very important to note, however, that **neither house is spared from storms.** Their survival does not depend on being sheltered from storms. **The metaphor suggests that God does not shelter Christians from life's storms** (illness, accidents, death, job loss, etc.).

While I do believe that our faith can reduce our stress level, we still must be **prepared** to live through the storms and tragedies that are common to all humankind.

On my desk up in my study here at the church I have a magnet with a saying on it that I find very helpful: **Serenity is not freedom from the storm, but peace within the storm.**

What helps us, then, as followers of Jesus, to have a strong foundation? What did Jesus tell us made the difference between the wise builder and the foolish builder?

This may sound simple, but it is actually quite profound. The difference is between the person who **hears the words of Jesus and acts on them**, and the person who hears the same words and does not act on them. **The difference, then, is not in what we are taught to believe, but in how we put what we believe**

into action. Or, as we heard it stated in today's Epistle lesson from James, "**Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.**"

In other words, it's one thing to have caring feelings for those who are oppressed and hurting, and it's quite another thing to actually do something to help alleviate their alienation and pain.

Wouldn't you know I had the opportunity to put this into practice just this morning. I arrived at the church around 7:30 a.m. and found a man sleeping (his t-shirt over his head, and an empty liquor bottle next to him) on the front porch of the church. I let him sleep. But then I went to wake him up around 8:20 a.m. But instead of simply asking him to move on, I invited him in to use the restroom, get a cup of coffee and some animal crackers that we put out during fellowship. His name is Fred, a 27 year old homeless man. We had a very nice visit and I invited him back to church at 11 o'clock if he would like to come back. Fred was very thankful.

It is the doing of Jesus' teachings (teachings that reflect the will of God and what it means to live a part of the kingdom of God) that leads to a strong foundation in our lives. Putting into practice the words of Jesus is the basis of a sure foundation.

Again, Matthew has spent the last three chapters in his gospel outlining those teachings of Jesus that we are to put into action. Needless to say, we don't have time this morning to read and list everything that was taught in the Sermon on the Mount. So I encourage you to go home and read chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew for yourselves. But here are a few nuggets:

- Blessed are the meek, the merciful, and the peacemakers;
- let your light shine before others;
- be reconciled with those with which you are angry;
- turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give to those in need;
- love your enemies;
- do not make a show of practicing your piety before others;
- forgive others;
- do not store up treasures on earth, but treasures in heaven;
- do not be anxious about your life;
- trust in God;
- strive for the kingdom of God
- do not judge, so that you may not be judged;
- take the log out of your own eye before trying to help take the speck out of your neighbor's eye;
- ask, search, knock;
- and do unto others as you would have them do unto you (the Golden Rule);

Whether or not you and I survive the storms of life that we all face, depends, according to today's gospel lesson, on not only hearing these words

of Jesus, but also putting them into action. Jesus wants us to follow his words, to build our lives, our families, our professions, and our congregation on these words. He wants us to be ready for the storms of life, that may include in our day and age things like economic downturns, pension defaults, war, depression (both mental and economic), relationships that fade, death of those who love us and whom we love, devastating illness, protracted disease, addictions, doors shut to advancement, and even the foolish things we do that get us into serious trouble.

On what kind of foundation, then, is your “house” (your life) built? On what kind of foundation is our church (our congregational life) built? What might we do to provide a little reinforcement?

Let us all ask God to give us the courage and strength and determination to strive to live by Jesus' teachings, so that we are not merely hearers, but also doers.

As poetically stated by Trappist monk and spiritual writer, poet, and social activist, Thomas Merton: “In a word, the whole Christian life consists in seeking the will of God by loving faith, and carrying out that will by faithful love.”

Or, as New Testament commentator, William Barclay writes: **“Knowledge must become action; theory must become practice; theology must become life.”**

May the words of Jesus truly transform us into active discipleship.

Amen.