

Doing the Word Begins with Active Listening

“Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.”
“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

James 1:19, 22

James 1:17-27
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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August 29, 2021

Knowing what to do, and doing what you know are two very different things. While knowledge is vital, it's not worth much if it isn't put into action. Perhaps that is the overall theme of the New Testament Book of James. In what many of us consider to be one of the most important verses of scripture, James states it this way, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” (v. 22). **James is more concerned with what we do with our faith, than with our intellectual assent to theological doctrines and propositions.**

As a moral discourse, steeped in the tradition of Hebrew wisdom literature, his letter involves the **ethical implications** of what we understand to be our calling as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. Saying that, it is still necessary to ponder, think, consider, reflect, dissect, even question and debate what we read and hear in the Bible. That's important and crucial to the life and journey of faith. And that's certainly something we do as progressives. Ultimately, however, **Jesus didn't just want people to hear him and understand him, but to follow him and to do the work of building the kin-dom of God.** William Willimon, former Chaplain at Duke University Chapel, once stated in a sermon:

We deceive ourselves into thinking that we have done the faith when we have merely listened, reflected, pondered, agreed. What we profess is not as important as what we are able to perform. Beliefs must be embodied, enacted in order to be real.

Or, as I once heard it stated, **we must turn our creeds into deeds.** Perhaps the most scathing criticism that can be leveled against persons or communities of faith is the old line, “After all is said and done, more is said than done.” For instance, we can't just *tell* our children and young people how to live good lives, we need to *show* them by being good role models ourselves. Those of you who are (or have been) parents of young children are fully aware we are being watched by them much more closely than we realize. All this begs the question: **As a follower of the ways of Jesus, what kind of example are you and I and we setting - at home, at work, at school, at church; with family, with friends, with complete strangers?** For me, it's the real-life syndrome of “practice what you preach.”

This is how we prevent hypocrisy, which is one of the main complaints leveled at organized religion. It is also a big reason why more and more people are choosing to have nothing to do with the church. They're tired of religious folks saying one thing and doing another. Willimon writes:

The world is quite right in judging the truth of the gospel on the basis of the sort of lives the gospel is able to produce. Do we really look like the God whom we praise here on Sunday morning?

Have our songs and prayers changed us, made us into that which we profess? That is the test, says James. Again, we already know that. We know that any sermon that is 'seen,' in deeds of love and justice, is more effective than one that is only spoken and heard.

Perhaps, the best way this can be summarized is with the famous quote often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, **"Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words."** In order for our faith to be genuine, real and authentic, it must be translated into deeds and actions. That's what James means when he writes later in his letter, "Faith without works is dead." We'll look at that famous verse in a few weeks.

The issue before us now is this: What will you and I do with what we have said, sung, prayed, and heard in this service of worship? **How will we put our faith into action later this very day?** What about tomorrow, when most of you will head back to work or dive into your usual Monday routine? What about the day after that? **This is what discipleship is all about, taking what we learn in the hearing of the word of God and putting it into practice.**

In today's reading from James, we are also reminded that the 'perfect law' – the law of love that gives freedom and liberty – is something not so much to be studied, but rather lived out in and through our individual lives and the life of the community of faith. James goes on to build on that by stating, "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless (v.26). Wow, not there's a blunt warning. He goes on, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (vv. 27).

In other words, **an ultimate test of our faith is how we treat and take care of the most vulnerable and most powerless among us.** That has always been an undergirding principle of the mission and ministry here at College Hill. Yet, what are ways that can be more fully enacted? How might this influence our response to those refugees fleeing Afghanistan this past week? Or, our response to earthquake victims in Haiti, or those about to suffer the catastrophic effects of Hurricane Ida, which is already beginning to slam onto the Louisiana coast at this very moment, currently a devastating and life-threatening Category 4 storm – and 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina? This is taking the word out into a hurting world.

I now want to return to an earlier verse in today's reading that also cries out for closer attention. Before even stating the importance of being doers of the word, James proclaims, **"You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak (v. 19). How quick you and I are to listening and not speaking is something worth reflecting upon.** This was done remarkably well in the commentary on this passage released online earlier this week from *The Presbyterian Outlook*. Written by the

Rev. Teri McDowell Ott, her review is entitled, "One of my favorite group activities focuses on active listening." Here's an important lesson on listening, which is perhaps the first step in putting what we hear into action. Ott writes:

In our lectionary passage for this Sunday, James highlights listening as a faithful act. "Be quick to listen, slow to speak." We are to be hearers of the Word as well as doers. We are also to listen well, to be active and present in our listening so we can hear the truth in faith and humility. Arrogance and self-confidence are highlighted throughout the book [of James] as obstacles to hearing the Word of God.

If we approach our conversations with arrogant certainty, assuming we already know what will be said and assuming we are in the right, we will deceive ourselves and cut ourselves off from the soul-saving truth. I appreciated James' emphasis on listening as I contemplated how difficult constructive dialogue is.

Listening is a skill we should spend time developing, especially because there are people among us who are dying to be heard."

Over the past year, some of the voices that many of us have attempted to actively listen to much more carefully are from the Black community. In my own engagements, including my work with the Synod of the Sun's Network for Dismantling Racism, and especially in preparing for an event to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, **I've experienced that cross-culture dialogue and understanding is indeed harder than I had imagined.** That goes back to the question to how well you and I actually listen. Ott suggests:

Humility is key to faithful listening. As hearers of the Word, we must be ready to confess how we have failed, the mistakes we have made and the bad habits of not listening we have developed.

Here's a few habits of not listening we should seek to avoid:

- **Listening with an agenda.** "I hear what you're saying and I'm going to apply the parts of it I understand to my goals, my plans, my idea of what is right. I will shape your narrative to fit my own."
- **Listening to co-opt or translate another's story into your own.** "I hear what you are saying, and I understand because I've experienced something similar. Listen to my story."
- **Listening to dismiss or gain ammunition for a counterattack.** "I heard what you were saying. Now listen to me tell you why you are wrong."
- **Listening to the tone of what is said instead of the content.** "I heard what she was saying, but she shouldn't have said it the way she did. She should have used a more respectful tone."

As White Presbyterian Americans, we have been engrained with the notion of being nice. A result of that, while not all bad, is to dismiss others we believe are not

speaking nicely. Ott concludes, **"I'm learning to unlearn my habits of not listening — habits that have protected me from painful truths, but have also inhibited change that would have fueled my growth."**

- What habits of not listening do you, do I, do we need to unlearn?
- To whom have you, have I, have we, not listened?
- To whom do you, do I, do we need to listen to promote our personal and communal growth and that of society.

And then, after truly listening, after hearing the Word, let us go forth daily to be doers of the Word.

Amen.

Resource:

Teri McDowell Ott, "One of my favorite group activities focuses on active listening", *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 8-23-21.

William Willimon, Duke University. "Doers of the Word" sermon from 8-31-1997.