

“Hearers and Doers”

Romans 2.12–16 & Matthew 7.21–28

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 29 May 2005

I was working at Stanford University on October 17, 1989. It was a little past 5:00 p.m., and I had just left my office and had gotten into my car. As I sat in the parking lot near the Medical School, my car began to bounce up and down, and I thought a couple of my friends were in a boisterous mood and were jumping up and down on my bumper. That actually wasn't the case; it was a magnitude 7 earthquake that killed 67 people and caused more than \$7 billion in damage. (It was actually a good thing I wasn't still in my office, as a seven-foot bookcase would have toppled over on me.) All in all, we were lucky. There was virtually no damage in Jean's and my house. The campus didn't fare so well; two years prior they had decided to forgo their earthquake insurance and to self-insure instead. *C'est la vie!*

Back in 1915, the Panama-Pacific Exhibition was held in San Francisco, and a new area was created to accommodate it. A lagoon was reclaimed by filling it in with mud and sand dredged up from San Francisco Bay. And this new area was called the Marina District. After the exhibition concluded, apartments and shops were built in the Marina District. It became a haven for yuppies in the 1980s, and was a very in-vogue place to live. And everything seemed just fine until October 17, 1989 when the soil under the Marina District was shaken violently by the earthquake. Geologists call what happened “*liquifaction*,” meaning that the soil acted like liquid, instead of acting like solid ground. Apartment buildings caved in, streets buckled, fires broke out, and lives were lost.

When Jesus describes the fate of those who hear his words, but do not act on them, I think of the Marina District: we think we're on solid ground, but it acts like liquid under stress. Jesus uses the metaphor of a house built on unstable soil, and I daresay there are times when each of us has been on shaky ground in the way we approach life, each other, and ourselves. So, where do we find real, reliable solid ground that remains firm even under stress?



Jesus offers this warning about hearing and doing as the conclusion to his Sermon on the Mount, one of the most compact formulations of his ideas about life and how we are to live it. (So, here is your homework for next week: I'd like you to dust off your Bible at home and read chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew's gospel. You may be surprised with how much you'll find packed into about three and a half pages of text. Some of the strongest teachings of Jesus' ministry are there: the Beatitudes, the Golden Rule, the charge to love your enemies, and the Lord's Prayer).

Imagine yourself as a person in Judea in the first century listening to this itinerant preacher. Perhaps you are a peasant from the countryside like Jesus himself, or maybe you are a Roman soldier who is curious about this odd religion of the Jews, or you might just be a curious bystander who hears a rather compelling message from this young, but wise, teacher.

Much of what he says resonates deeply with his Judaism, but he seems to offer some counterintuitive rhetorical twists. Who on earth would think that the poor are blessed? Or those who suffer for the sake of justice being happy?

It reminds me of that scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, in which several people at the rear of the crowd are straining to hear Jesus, and one woman thinks she hears Jesus say, “Blessed are the Greek.” When someone corrects her, she says, “Oh, the *meeek*. The *meeek* shall inherit the earth. Well, isn't that nice there getting something, because they have a

hell of a time.” That’s what John Dominic Crossan calls “radical socioeconomic reversal,” turning the tables on conventional wisdom in Jesus’ culture and in ours.

So, if you’re still imagining that you’re part of the throng listening to Jesus, you might just walk away and say, “Well, isn’t that nice,” just like the woman in *Life of Brian*. But, Jesus isn’t going to let you off the hook. You’ve heard what he has said, and that’s only a small step, initiating the process. Now, it’s up to you and take what you’ve heard and *put it into practice*. And Jesus leaves you with a strong metaphor and a warning to be wise not foolish.

The Greek verb *poieo* is translated in the text you heard this morning either as “do” or “act,” and in this morning’s brief extract, it is used six times. The use of the present tense suggests that Jesus is talking about a way of being and doing now, rather than isolated incidents of good deeds in the past. “Only the one who is *doing* the will of my Father” will enter the kingdom of Heaven. “Everyone who hears these words of mine and *continues to act* on them will be like a man who built his house on rock.”

That begs the question: *what are we doing now* to enact the words we’ve heard so many times before? How do we put our faith into practice?

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Paul wrote to the church in Rome, “It isn’t the *hearers* of the law who are just in God’s sight, but the *doers* of the law who will be considered just.” So, what is the law?

The brilliant first-century rabbi, Hillel, was once told by a facetious Gentile that if the rabbi could recite the law standing on one foot, that he himself would convert to Judaism. Hillel stood on one foot and said, “*What is hateful to you, do not do to others*. The rest is commentary. Go learn it.” So, that’s the law. (And yes, you did hear Jesus and Hillel echo each other.) Jesus is quoted later in Matthew’s gospel as saying that the two greatest commandments are to love the Lord your God with heart, soul, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. “On these two commandments,” says Jesus, “hang all the law and the prophets.”¹ Hear the law.

Many of you probably have the idea that the Reformation (and Paul) placed faith above works or belief above action. Martin Luther wrote that “Faith is a living, unshakable *confidence* in God’s grace. . . This kind of *trust* in and knowledge of God’s grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. . . *It is as impossible to separate works from faith as burning and shining from fire*.”² Luther and Paul both echo Jesus saying that the wise one not only hears, but acts.

Hearing and doing, being faithful and enacting it: they are two sides of the same coin, rather than a dichotomy. Hearing can mean studying, meditating, listening for the voice of God. Doing is a response to that hearing.

Faith isn’t about believing, it’s about doing, Crossan says, “Faith does not mean intellectual assent to a proposition” (such as Jesus is divine or Mary was a virgin or Christianity is the only way to salvation), but rather it is “a vital commitment to a program. . . Faith. . . is not just a partial mind-set, but a total lifestyle commitment.”

I don’t put too much stock in orthodoxy or “right belief.” In fact, I don’t really care much about what the members of this congregation believe as how you all enact your faith. It is by the ways your faith expresses itself that I see your faith, and I see it all around me.

Frankly, I get fed up with people that think just because they believe some proposition about who Jesus was and that they are saved and that’s all they really need to

¹ Mt. 22.36–39

² Luther’s preface to his commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Romans. (Italics added.)

do. End of story. That's not mature Christian faith, it's a simplistic, legalistic response to what Jesus was calling us toward as his disciples.

We need to work hard on the path of discipleship. We need to spend time in study and prayer. We need to take the Bible seriously in order to hear and know the law, the prophets, and the gospel. We need to have a community around us, in which our faith is nurtured. And we need to act on our faith.

One of the few things Jerry Falwell and I agree on is that Christians need to bring their faith into the public arena and into the ballot box. Clearly, Mr. Falwell and I interpret our faith differently, and we disagree on nearly every issue of public policy. But if you take a copy of the Sermon on the Mount with you every time you go into the polling place, and consider what Jesus said – rather than what James Dobson says – your vote is likely a faithful response.

What I see as I look around this congregation is people working to prevent homelessness, supporting students at a school in East Jerusalem, building schools in Angola, writing letters to the editor in support of peace, visiting the sick, praying for those who are sick or grieving, writing to those in prison, investing your money not just in tsunami relief but in international development, speaking out for the rights of the oppressed, and working to make this a fruitful body of Christ's disciples who make a difference. I observe not just hearing, but doing. I see not just belief, but action. And I give thanks to God for the ways you all bring your faith alive.

At one of our Monday sermon talk-backs, a woman recently told me that she listens to Sharon's and my sermons each Sunday and tries to find something to put into practice the following week. I thought that was really awesome! It's another example of hearing and doing.

Don't get me wrong: it's important that we spend time nurturing our relationship with God, and focusing on spiritual discipline and development. It's something we in the UCC could focus even more on. But, the spiritual energy we derive from our relationship with the holy is not a tonic or elixir meant to be bottled up or swallowed for our personal satisfaction. Rather, it is to be poured out as a libation for others, to fight injustice, to help the world to realize God's shalom.

One of the reasons that I am UCC is not just because I grew up in the tradition (which I did, and which I left, and then returned to). It is because for hundreds of years, Congregationalists have been attuned to living out their faith through action, and that is a part of the *hearing and doing* that I want to be a part of. And I hope that you do, too. I see you hearing, and I know that I'll see you doing, as well.

Amen.