

Doers of the Word

James 1:22-25; 2:14-17; Psalm 126; Mark 7:24-37

September 6, 2009

Whitefish UMC

- † My friend Christina has just changed jobs. A young mother with a PhD in Ecology, she has mostly worked from home on contracts with universities or government agencies to monitor the environmental effects of various activities on the earth.
- † But intrigued by the prospect of teaching, she applied for the position of Director of the Natural Resources program at our Flathead Valley Community College. She got the job, a bit to her surprise. After securing daycare for her little boy, four years old, she met her first students this week.
- † Expecting a traditional academic environment, Christina found an entirely different scene. Did you know that FVCC's enrollment has increased between 39 and 48 percent over last year?
- † Many of those students swelling classes at FVCC are “nontraditional.” That means they are not young people right out of high school continuing their learning at the local college. Instead, they are displaced workers—heads of families, older men and women who have found themselves out of a job this Labor Day. So they have returned to school to be retrained for new careers.
- † Without this retooling, those who have lost high-paying jobs at Plum Creek, Stoltze, Semitool, or the Aluminum plant would face trying to support a family on near-minimum wage jobs.

- † In her bestseller, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, author Barbara Ehrenreich describes how for six months she lived the life of an unskilled but fully employed wage earner.
- † In Florida, she worked as a waitress on the 2:00-10:00 p.m. shift, then as a house cleaner for Molly Maid. In Maine she worked as a “dietary aide” at a nursing home and as a hotel maid. In Minnesota she clerked at a Wal-Mart, the largest private employer in the nation with 825,000 people on the payroll.
- † The author lived in budget motels and dangerous trailer parks, ate only what she could afford, which was mostly fast-food. She discovered that she needed two unskilled jobs just to squeak by, and overall she found herself physically and emotionally drained.
- † According to the Economic Policy Institute, 30% of the American work force earns less than \$10/hour. They are the people who make our American way of life possible. They clean our office buildings at night, serve us at restaurants, repair our cars, handpick our fresh produce, and mow-n-blow suburban yards.
- † Even though these folks work long and hard, they barely make ends meet. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, “in the median state a minimum wage worker would have to work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing.”
- † Maybe the nontraditional students at FVCC don’t know these exact statistics, but they do know from experience that they need to learn new skills in order to have an economic future that offers hope for their families and for them.

- † And so what, you might ask, does that have to do with us, gathered here for worship on this Labor Day weekend?
- † “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.... Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” These words were written in the first century by a disciple of Jesus, perhaps his brother James, to a small community of believers, a church.
- † It seems that this church gave preferential treatment to rich people. Wealthy people were given the best seats; poor people were asked to stand in the back. (Of course in our church, it seems that the best seats ARE in the BACK!)
- † But James said, in effect, that you can’t profess to believe that Jesus Christ is God’s love for all people and treat some folks worse than others because they are poor. Your behavior and your beliefs have to match! Your creeds and your practices have to be consistent!
- † Just so you know, the letter of James set off a theological debate that has raged for hundreds of years. Martin Luther even said the book of James should be removed from the Bible! He thought that the book of James promoted what is called “works righteousness”—in other words you can earn your salvation through what you do, not through faith in God’s grace, which is unmerited.
- † But isn’t it true that faith is authentic to the degree that it affects behavior? What good is religion unless it renews, changes, transforms human beings and the choices they make and the lives they live? What good is it if you say you believe in Jesus whose mission was compassion and justice but you walk by a brother or a sister who is cold and hungry?

† If you read your newsletter for this month, you know I love poems by Mary Oliver. Here is one called “The Journey:”

○ One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began, though the voices around you
kept shouting their bad advice—though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do.

† There comes a time, the poet and the writer of James conclude, to acknowledge what you need to do, who you are called to be, and then take the risk of being and doing the word that calls you.

† If you’re lucky and blessed, you can get paid to do what you love and support a family doing it. I count myself among those who are blessed in this way. But maybe you or your parents have felt called to do what you have or had to do to provide adequately for those who depend on you. Maybe you hated your job but did it willingly for those you love.

† John Buchanan relates a wonderful story by Will Campbell, a rebellious Southern Baptist preacher. Campbell says he has no patience for the idea of vocation or calling as a “spiritual gloss to what we have chosen to do for ourselves.”

† He tells about talking to a high-wire artist in a traveling circus and asking why he did what he did. The man’s answer included all the expected romanticized vignettes—the circus life, the laughter and applause of a crowd, the thrill of hurtling through space.

- † But then, Campbell remembers, the man said something unexpected: “You really want to know why I go up there on that damned thing night after night? Man, I would have quit a long time ago. But my sister is up there. And my wife and my father are up there.
- † My sister has more troubles than Job. My wife is a devil-may-care nut and my old man is getting older. If I wasn’t up there, some bad night, man...smash!”
- † “But why are they up there?” Campbell asked. The man looked like he didn’t want to answer, and as he walked away he said, “Because I drink too much!”
- † Yes, we do what we do because we have to, or it’s all we know. We do it to put food on the table, to care for an aging parent or sister, to support or help our friends or kids.
- † But this can be a holy calling, too—if we let it be. We can choose to resent every minute of those things we have to do, or we can do it filled with a sense of God’s calling and grace.
- † My friend Mary is a nail technician. She does fingernails and toenails. And believe me, she has seen some mighty nasty nails. And yet through the grace of God, she experiences her work on aged, gnarled, crippled feet—on tired and worn-out feet—as ministry. Her hands are full of love as she tends to the nails of an Alzheimer’s patient whose husband brings her in every couple of weeks, even though his wife has no idea who anybody is or what is going on.
- † In Oregon, I met a nail technician who spoke of being trained at a school across the street from a nursing home. She learned the business working on some challenging feet, but she finds her work to be a healing calling.

- † Today we asked the children: “What do you want to do when you grow up?” And for some of us grown-ups, that’s still a good question isn’t it? When I first contemplated becoming a pastor around 1990, I found these words from the writer and theologian Frederick Buechner on a seminary application:
- † “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hungers meet.” But more recently, Buechner, now in his eighties, has written that the question of what to do leads to a more important question of what you will BE.
- † The better question is “What in the world will you BE when you grow up?” Some of us get so busy doing that we forget why we do what we do. It’s easy to get caught up with doing—even doing the work of the church—while forgetting who we are called to be.
- † And who is that? Of course it varies a bit for each of us. But some qualities are meant for each of us: compassionate, forgiving, accepting, encouraging, giving. There are some other characteristics that we each could add to that list.
- † If we match our being with our doing and with the teachings of Jesus, then God delights in us, and we in God’s grace.
- † Back to my friend Christina. I believe (and I think she does too) that God called her to her new job teaching mostly nontraditional students. Lots of them haven’t been to school in a long time. They are filled with anxiety, empty of confidence. But Christina tells of encouraging them even when their lab experiments fail, of laughing with them at the seeming absurdity of tasks. She is a professor AND a minister. And I thank God for her and others of you who become

ministers of the word—doers as well as hearers and be-ers. And you don't need a seminary degree!

- † Let's close with Mary Oliver's poem again, including some new lines:

One day you finally knew
what you had to do and began
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice.

You felt the old tug
at your ankles...
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do.

It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.

But little by little...
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds
and there was a new voice
which you slowly recognized
as your own
as you strode deeper and deeper

into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life that you could save.

† As Jesus reminds us, we save our own lives when we give ourselves away. That is His mystery, which we embrace and remember in this Holy Communion.

† Amen.

Sources:

Mary Oliver, “Journey,” Ten Poems to Change Your Life, Roger Housden, ed.

John Buchanan, “Doing What You Need to Do,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Daniel Clendenin, <http://www.journeywithjesus.org>