

Follow the Instructions

Rev. Alida Ward

Luke 6:46-49

If you happened to be here last Sunday, at the 9:00 service, you witnessed our largest class of 3rd graders ever, receiving their third grade Bibles. There are a lot of fun things that we get to do as ministers in this church, but one of the most fun, I gotta tell you, is presenting those Bibles each year. I know there will be plenty more moments in these kids' lives when somebody calls out their name, and presents them with something awesome – there are graduations ahead for them, award ceremonies, all that – but it's hard to believe that the look on their faces then could possibly be any more excited than the look on their 8 year old faces now when Marcia Carothers calls out their name and they run forward for that Bible. They are so excited to get that book, that book with their name in it. It's the coolest thing to see.

So, you remember, if you were here last week, that all those dozens of third graders, clutching their Bibles like they'd been handed bars of gold, all of them sat down up here, and I talked to them about that book, that precious book they were holding. And I said that the Bible kind of reminded me of one of my favorite books at home, which I shared with them. You may remember. It's a book I was given for Christmas by my kids, this book with a picture of Rosie the Riveter on it – and it's called 'Dare to Repair.'

I love this book. What it is is a book full of instructions on how to fix everything in your home from a stuck garage door to a dishwasher that's stopped washing dishes. And I told the kids that the Bible is really a lot like this. It's a book full of really useful instructions on how to make things work better and fix what's broken.

In our lives, in our world.

You can tell when a children's sermon is really hitting home with the kids.

You can also tell when you're preaching a dud.

I'll be honest – this one was a bit of a dud.

When I started telling the kids how cool this book was because it tells me how to fix toilets, and the Bible's kind of like that, too,

I could see a lot of those faces, those formerly-very-excited faces, going more like "huh?"

And that's when you know it's time to say

"Well, kids, time to go to Church School! See you later!"

So you might wonder what possesses me to bring my Dare to Repair book back into the pulpit this week.

I am taking a risk, it's true.

In a couple minutes, all of YOU may be looking at me like, "Huh?"

But I've been thinking about this book this week, and what I said to the kids about the Bible being like this.

And I also actually fixed a toilet.

And believe it or not, these things are related.

We have an upstairs toilet that stopped working weeks ago.

And by weeks, I actually mean months.

Sure, I could have taken the easy, some would say logical, way out, and called a plumber.

But why do that, when you've got 'Dare to Repair' on your bookshelf.

I had all the instructions I needed –

there's, in fact, a whole chapter in here on replacing toilet innards.

Except I didn't actually do it.

I found that at any given moment,

given the choice between fixing that toilet upstairs and doing, really, anything else,

"anything else" always won out.

I knew what to do.
 I'd practically memorized the instructions.
 I just kept not doing it.

David's father is here visiting with us this weekend.
 He arrived Friday evening.
 Somewhere around Thursday I realized that this meant that I really had to fix that toilet.

And so I did. I'm not sure the words "sweet smell of success" really apply here,
 but I have to tell you, there's nothing like turning the water back on and having everything
 actually work to make you feel pretty darn good.
 Flushed with victory – I'll just let that sink in –
 I greeted my father in law on Friday night
 with grease marks on my face and a couple bruises on my elbows, but more than a little
 pleased with myself.

This may be one of the strangest –
 and lengthiest – sermon openings ever –
 and I have this uneasy sense that using plumbing as a Biblical analogy has violated some
 unwritten rule of preaching.

But here's where I am going with this.
 I think I *was* technically correct to tell the kids last week that the Bible is like an instruction
 manual, like a how-to guide, like my Dare to Repair book.
 But I could also have told them that it only actually works when we do.
 A how-to manual gathering dust on a bookshelf hasn't actually achieved anything –
 me reading and re-reading the instructions for weeks didn't actually fix anything –
 and the words of the Gospel sitting on the pages aren't going to repair anything,
 let alone the world –
 unless we actually **do**. Unless we actually get up and do, get to work and fix, read and hear
 those words and do them.

What John read to you just a few minutes ago was Jesus saying just that.
 He didn't use plumbing metaphors,

but he did actually use a construction metaphor.

He was talking to a crowd of people, and he said, basically, this:

“It’s great that you come out and listen to what I say.

But if you don’t actually do what I’m asking you to do,

it’s like you’ve got a beautiful house without any foundation to it.

It won’t last. It’s pretty, but it’s not much of a home.

One bad flood, and it’s gone.

“But if you hear me,” he said, “if you take my words seriously,

it’s like you’ve dug way down for the foundation,

built your house on solid rock.

You’re good. You’re good. You’ve got it.”

So why come to me and call me Lord and not do what I tell you to do,

he said –

don’t be like that.

Hear my words, know my words, and **act** on them.

Then we’ve got something to build on.

A couple years ago now, church member Chuck Ellis gave me a book to read.

Chuck will be embarrassed that I’m up here saying this about him,

but the truth is that Chuck is one of those people who really tries to put faith into action;

among other things, he’s one of our longest-serving Appalachia trip leaders,

and he works hard to make sure that his Bible doesn’t sit on the shelf like an unused instruction manual.

This book Chuck gave me to read is called ‘The Hole in Our Gospel.’

The Hole in our Gospel.

It’s a memoir, written by a man named Richard Stearns,

who was the CEO of Lenox,

and it tells the story of how he, as an evangelical Christian,

came to see how there was, as he puts it, this hole, gaping hole,

in the Christianity he was hearing and seeing.

And the hole was what people were doing – or rather, not doing – about the needs of the world.

On a mission trip to Uganda,

in the home of a young man, one of the millions of AIDS orphans in Africa,

Stearns was overwhelmed by the question: where was the church?
 And thus his conviction: for too many Christians, there is a hole in their Gospel.
 Worship, he writes in this book, is not enough.
 Belief is not enough. Personal morality is not enough.
 God demands more.
 If your personal faith in Christ has no positive outwards expression,
 then your faith has a hole in it.
 If you are not responding to the great needs of those in this world who suffer,
 then your faith has a hole in it.
 And he quotes the very passage that John read to us this morning:
 “Why do you call me Lord, Lord,” says Jesus, “and not do what I say?”

Stearns is no longer the CEO of Lenox –
 he, as you may know, is the head of World Vision,
 a Christian charitable organization that helps extraordinary numbers of the poor, the
 widowed, the orphaned, and the hungry around this world,
 all of them our brothers and sisters.
 He has worked hard to make sure that evangelical Christians, all of us,
 fill in that hole in the Gospel –
 to make sure that the Bible doesn’t remain on the shelf as an unused instruction book.
 He’s taken seriously Jesus’ call to build our house of faith on solid rock.

A couple weeks ago,
 David and I went over to Sacred Heart to hear the authors of another book,
 the husband and wife team of Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn.
 Kristof is a New York Times columnist passionately committed to shining a light on the needs
 of the poor worldwide, and particularly the struggles of girls and women.
 And the book that the he and his wife Sheryl have now written together
 is their way of encouraging everyone to do something.
 It’s called ‘A Path Appears’,
 and what it is is a collection of stories, really, about people who have chosen to do –
 people who in ways small and large are doing things that are having an effect.
 There are stories, yes, of people who have founded organizations –
 Organizations raising money for clean water, for medicines, for women’s health.

But there are plenty of stories of people, like you and me, doing something small, giving something small, in a way that collectively becomes something extraordinary – the nine year old girl who asked people not to give her birthday presents but instead to help her buy a well for a village; the school librarian who spent out of her own salary every week to buy books for one particular boy to have as his own.

The point of the book isn't to make the reader go 'awww'.

It's to inspire us to do.

And here's one of the book's major points:

Doing makes you feel wonderful.

A whole section of the book is on how the act of giving and helping makes you feel good and whole and alive in a way that nothing else can.

There are actually studies that volunteering has an even greater effect on health and happiness than exercising –

I kind of like that study.

The pursuit of happiness, the authors write, comes through helping other people; the best thing you can do for yourself and your own joy is to do good.

Which may be exactly what Jesus was trying to say to those crowds of people all around him.

If you want a life that will be lasting and true, he was saying,

a life of truest joy and deepest faith --

if you want to build a life on solid rock, on a firm foundation,

then don't just listen to me, he said, do what I'm asking you to do.

I want to close with a poem

that was written almost 10 years ago

by a child of this church, now no longer a child.

Anne Benjamin was a teenager in SPF a decade ago,

and went with us to Appalachia year after year,

repairing homes, like so many of our teens, in the hollers of West Virginia.

And after one of those Appalachia trips, she wrote a poem, entitled, simply, Foundation.

Her crew that summer had had the task of shoring up the foundation for a house that was beginning to tumble down.

But Anne knew full well that that wasn't the only thing they were shoring up.

She knew that that wasn't the only foundation they were laying.

She knew it had something to do with the Christ who calls us to not just listen to his words, not just leave the instruction manual on the shelf,

but to do.

I'll let Anne have the final word:

*They didn't have a foundation
when we came.*

*Nothing but a tree trunk
jammed under the house
as if the ground had left suddenly
and they didn't know what to do.*

We dug them a foundation.

*Two feet through solid rock
with one of the puppies at our heels
and the kids trying to help.*

*Three days through solid rock
and mud
and water,*

*when it rained,
and one day for the cement
and another for it to dry.*

*We named the hole
'Alison'*

*because she was the one
who dug it most.*

*Fifteen hours
of picks and mattocks
and railroad jokes.*

*On the last day
it was done*

*And we played basketball
with the children.
It was strange to leave them-
I wasn't the same person who came.
Something about the digging
and the children
and the building
of what needed to be built
had changed me.
They needed the house
but not as badly
as I needed the foundation.*

Amen.