
Doing the Word

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 17 – Year B

As I was thinking this week about today's reading from James, and about "*doing* God's Word," my mind kept wandering back to my first foray into a foreign language.

I started German in seventh grade. It was mostly textbook learning: grammatical exercises in the dreaded green book, lists of vocabulary to memorize, and very rudimentary dialogue in class. You know the type: the teacher poses the same question to all of us, and we answer by plugging in our particular data: *Wie heißt du? Ich heiße Cathy. Woher kommst du? Ich komme aus Atlanta.*

I left high school with a basic understanding of how the language worked, in theory at least. But not with the ability to speak it with any fluency. Though that didn't stop me from thinking that I was quite the expert!

I continued with German well after high school, and took classes with people who had studied abroad and *did* speak fluently. As I realized how far I still had to go, I grew more and more self-conscious about using German at all. To protect myself from being embarrassed or found out, I carefully constructed my comments in my head before saying them out loud, which meant that I was usually way out of step with the conversation and failed to contribute what I could have. And stayed stuck.

But, then I spent a summer in Germany, where I had no choice but to use my German, no matter how rough it was—or I would never have been able to eat, or shop, or find the bathroom. I had to take the risk of looking foolish—and exposing myself as an American tourist (as if my bright white tennis shoes and white socks hadn't already given me away!). I had to reach out to other people and rely on their willingness to talk slowly, to pardon my gaffs, and to help me make meaning.

And I discovered that even with my mistakes, this language actually worked. And slowly, it went from being a set of disembodied words and principles to a living language that opened up a whole new world and new relationships.

Now, if you've studied a foreign language, you know what it took me years to grasp: while classroom learning, vocabulary lists, and rules of grammar provide a good starting point, you really only become fluent in a language by using it. With other people. And by opening yourself to the flow of real, live conversation—and holding on when you don't understand.

This is true of faith, too. We really only learn faith by acting on it. We really only get the power of God's Word when we do it—or at least try to. Of course, as with a foreign language, it's helpful to start with a foundation: some basic vocabulary, like "grace" and "sin" and "incarnation." And some fundamental grammar: the logic and boundaries that make it intelligible—and hold it all together. For Christians, these parameters are laid out in many places, like the commandments, creeds, teachings of Jesus, and liturgy and sacraments.

Yet, let us not mistake the words and rules for the living language, or the living faith.

And let us not assume that understanding them is a prerequisite for faith: that we have to know *how* Jesus is God incarnate, or how his death and resurrection redeem us, before we start to follow him. In fact, as with any language, I don't think we *can* really understand what the vocabulary of faith means or how its grammar works, until we use it. Until we trust that it's true, and act accordingly.

But taking this leap of faith and following after Christ demands so much of us: it means we have to obey God's commandments in concrete ways, in public and *in private*. It means we have to be slow to speak and slow to anger, but quick to listen and love and forgive. It means we have to take seriously the things we say and hear in church. It means we have to give up our attempts to justify ourselves; and turn our attention, instead, to loving and serving others.

No, the life of faith and discipleship isn't easy. And we seem to be ingenious at finding ways to squirm out of it. On the one hand, we may tell ourselves that we aren't ready; we still have doubts; we don't know what to do. And so we wait for certainty—and do nothing.

Remember how I didn't use my German, because I believed it wasn't good enough? How I refused to speak up, because I might mess up, or people might think I was a fake? Well, I've done this with my faith, too. I waited, for years, to call myself a Christian, because I thought I had to have all my sins conquered and questions answered, first. I avoided reaching out to a grieving friend, because I didn't trust myself to say or do the right thing. I turned down opportunities to teach, because I didn't think I knew enough. I hesitated to lead, because I believed I was too inexperienced.

But I see now that this insistence that I wasn't ready or capable or faithful enough was just a smokescreen for my fear—and for my reluctance to follow Christ and trust God and take the risk that faith always requires.

On the other hand, we might excuse ourselves from the hard path of discipleship by convincing ourselves that we've already arrived, so we don't need to follow anymore. We've heard it all; so we don't need to listen anymore. We've got faith in the bag, so we can check that one off the list!

But that's not how faith works. We hear and we do; we do and we hear. Hearing and doing God's Word go hand in hand—and both are gifts from above. Both are means of grace through which God guides us and grows us in faith and understanding. Indeed, when we just let go of our pretension and fear—with God's help, and start to follow Christ *anyway*—with God's help, God does bless us—and others through us. And God builds up our fluency in the language of faith and love.

So today, as we look into the mirror of scripture, let us not forget what we see. Let us live what we hear. And let us, with God's help, go out and do God's Word.