

Sermon on the (a)Mount

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Reading

A. Powell Davies (1902 - 1957) was a Unitarian minister who served All Souls Church in Washington D.C. from 1944 until his death in 1957. This is an excerpt from "What Must We Do To Be Saved?" a sermon included in "The Temptation To Be Good":

If we are to be saved, it must begin in personal lives, transform homes and change communities, and thus flow out into the world. A time of cruelties and atrocities must become a time of restored humaneness. People must care as they have forgotten to care. Gentleness must come back into life—even while the realities are still harsh. These things must happen to us or we shall not be human enough for the task before us...

To be saved, we *must* abandon in spiritual matters the delusion that we can be picked up by some sort of heavenly chariot and driven away from our woes. We must always start exactly where we are, and proceed to do the first things that raise our standards and improve us in character. We must make for that "shining light," even though it seem a faint one. It may mean expunging a prejudice, expelling a bitterness, foregoing a mean intention, deciding upon a generosity—whatever is *real* can really get us started.

We shall begin to be saved, our civilization and all its people, when we *really* turn our backs upon what we must leave behind, and set our steps toward the future's guiding light. But it must be a real journey with all that goes with a real journey, including its burdens and sacrifices. It must be a journey to which we are altogether committed...

Sermon -

What must we do to be saved?

That was the title of the sermon by Unitarian minister, A. Powell Davies that Jerry read from: What must we do to be saved?

Does that question make you a little uncomfortable?

Though we are fond of questions in this congregation, this is not a question that you hear much around here. It is often associated with an evangelical Christianity and implies that salvation is something that happens after you die, that it is about where you will spend eternity.

But that doesn't seem to be what Davies is talking about, does it? He appears to be talking about *this* life; saving this civilization and all its people; salvation that runs through our personal lives, our homes, and our communities; salvation that begins to take shape right here and right now, even when the realities are still harsh.

And what advice does he give in order to effect our salvation? One might sum it up in two short words: *Get real!*

He uses the word *real* or derivations of the word a half dozen times in a fairly short passage.

We shall begin to be saved, he says, when we *really* turn our backs upon what we must leave behind.

Gentleness must come back into life—even while the realities are still harsh.

Our salvation may mean expunging a prejudice, expelling a bitterness, foregoing a mean intention, deciding upon a generosity—whatever is *real*, he says, can *really* get us started.

Once started, we must set our steps toward the future's guiding light. But it must be a *real* journey with all that goes with a *real* journey, including its burdens and sacrifices.

What must we do to be saved? To be saved, we *must* abandon in spiritual matters the delusion that we can be picked up by some sort of heavenly chariot and driven away from our woes. We must always start exactly where we are. Whatever is *real* can *really* get us started. So get real!

Get real is a slogan that also works well for pledge drive time, isn't it? A lot of times, when you hear the phrase, *get real!*, it has to do with...well, money. Yes, I'd like to take a cruise, but...*get real!* Yes, son, you'd like to have a brand new car, but...*get real!* Yes, I'd like to give something to every good cause that comes knocking or calling or emailing, but...*get real!*

As we hammer out a budget; as we look over the present year's expenditures; as we create next year's wish lists; as we seek a balance between a limitless mission and limited financial resources, challenging ourselves to do more than we thought we could, but not asking to do more than we *really* can: we're doing our best to *get real*.

But *getting real*, like *being saved*, can mean different things to different people. There are those who say that this time of year, as we set pledge goals and talk to each other about our financial commitments to this congregation, that this is a time to dream! This is a time for visions, built on possibilities and potential; a time to focus on mission rather than money; a time to ask "what can we *be*?" rather than "what can we *afford*?" Getting real is not about putting on the brakes, but about breaking down our perceived boundaries.

There are others who say, dreaming is all well and good, but now's the time to *wake up!* We may be marching toward God, but the Devil is in the details, and if we don't pay attention, he will bite us in the aaaa...dministration. Because it is the details, the reality of our circumstances, our financial capabilities and limitations, it is the details that we must grapple with. A congregational mission can't survive without a congregation, and the congregation and its activities survive because we pay attention to the budget, to the practical matters of keeping a congregation going, because, as we pursue our mission, we take the time to focus on the cost of it all...we *get real*.

And, truthfully, all of those folks that I mentioned, from both perspectives, are right. (You didn't think I'd choose sides, did you?)

Let me give a quick example: you have probably noticed, over the years, that I never give a sermon without a written text. Now, this example is personal. It doesn't apply to all ministers. Some are very capable of giving a wonderful sermon without having a text in front of them...I am envious of that skill, but I am also very aware that it is not a skill that is in keeping with my style, so I don't foresee a time in which I will not have a text in front of me as I deliver a sermon. Referring to a text that I have created in a quiet, reflective time helps me to stay on point (I hope!); to follow a train of thought without too many detours; to more clearly articulate ideas than I would be able to improvise on the spot...it helps me (ideally) to bring the content that

I would not be able to bring to a sermon otherwise. So, though I am looking out at you all, catching eyes and noticing expressions and seeing people nod off now and then, you will also see my eyes return to the page, referring back to the words I have chosen for this time, making sure that I am "on track."

But what if I just kept my eyes on the text? What if, instead of looking at you all, in an effort to stay completely on point, I kept my eyes solely on the pages in front of me? What if I simply read from the text; (maybe even mumbled because thinking about the microphone is kind of a distraction and I can read much better with my eyes closer to the page.) I'll bet I could read through this without one mistake. Better yet, as I'm reading, I could maybe even improve some of this, make some corrections, edit as I go (I see a few things I would change right now). Geez, when I finished, I'll bet I could have a really tightly reasoned, well-written, impeccably-read sermon...but for what? If I have lost the connection with you, what's a sermon for? If I am not facing you, looking into your eyes, "noticing your beautiful faces and complex natures," as Annie Dillard says in our hymnal, what good is a sermon? You, after all, are what makes this a sermon. You are the reason that I wrote this sermon. It is important for me to come back to the text, to further articulate what I have reflected on, so that I can tell you what I set out to tell you, but if my eyes stayed on the written word, if I was just reading, if I was completely wrapped up in the words...I have missed the point.

(And I am never going to use that illustration in a sermon again...talk about making me feel self-conscious!)

But you see what I mean: to me, having a text and maintaining a connection with you during a sermon is not an either/or proposition. I believe that both text and connection are necessary, vital, and when they work together, when they click into some rhythm where I am no longer consciously thinking or planning either, when the text I have reflected upon alone meets with the connection that I feel with you all here and outside of here, *that* is when a sermon works. And what I am really talking about here, in case I have wandered too far a field in *this* sermon, is not sermons, but pledge drives, budgets, and getting real.

Do we need, (at this time of year and throughout the year), do we need to refer back to our text, to keep a sharp eye on the pages of numbers reflecting membership and budget and financial capabilities and particular circumstances of where we find ourselves at this point in time? Of course we do. That's what keeps us on track. That's what guides our steps. There are certain limitations that are *real*.

But we can't let our eyes get locked on the page. We need to remember to look up and out at our mission. We could arrange the numbers and arrange our activities to achieve the perfect balanced budget and savings besides, but if we have lost sight of our mission, if we have lost sight of the congregation, what good would that be? We don't have to choose between focusing on money or mission; reality or dreams; details or vision; we can do all of that.

Getting real is not only about accepting limitations. It is sometimes about pushing beyond the limits that we thought we could not breach. Our mission calls us further than we think we can go; calls us to let go of fear and embrace confidence. We are asking a big question that calls for a larger understanding of our own capabilities. What must we do, we are asking, to be saved? We are out to transform ourselves, our homes, our communities...our *world*. We always start exactly where we are...but we then set our steps toward the future's guiding light. Financial limitations are real... and so is our mission, and sometimes that mission ushers us into a new vision of reality.

This congregation has already proven that. In your relatively short history (ten years... happy tenth!), you have made great strides. You have come together to meet substantial increases in the pledge goal over the last few years. You have ordained and installed a minister. You have joined with that minister in creating and exploring new ways of increasing the power of this congregation's ministry in the wider community. You have organized a choir that has the whole District buzzing. You have purchased property on which to build. You have accomplished so much and more important than those accomplishments, even, is what you have become and are becoming: you are an actively-compassionate, socially-conscious, light-hearted, serious-minded, fun-loving, reflective and responsive, transforming and transformative community. You planted the seeds of a congregation ten years back and, through all the harsh weather and the difficult realities, you have watered and cared for and nurtured that plant, and look at what you have created...feel what you have helped to build...just for a moment, before we rush ahead into where we will go, appreciate where we are right now.

I know that you do. I have heard some of you, reflecting on this congregation's journey, exclaim, "It's just *unreal*." I understand that. I understand where it comes from. It's a way of saying, "Wow!" It's a way of saying, considering the obstacles, considering the number of moves we have made, considering that we are in the middle of a religiously conservative area, considering the volunteer time and energy and talent required, considering physical and financial and time limitations, considering how busy people are, and the number of things vying for our time, considering all of those *realities*, what a wondrous thing to be where we are; what an

improbable place to be; how *unreal* is this?

I understand the sentiment, but I want to tell you clearly: This, too, is *real*. This is real. This is real because you have set your steps toward the future's guiding light, however faint it seems at times, *and* because you know that the journey you have started has to be a *real* journey with all that goes with a *real* journey, including its burdens and sacrifices. It has to be a journey, says Davies, to which we are altogether committed...

But you already knew that. Welcome to the journey.