Sunday, October 22, 1972
THE POWER OF POSITIVE ACTING
Mark 1:14-20 (6, 1, 17, 65)

We've all heard a lot about the power of positive thinking and what it can do. And there is no doubt that the way in which we think can and does affect the way we act. But there is another side to this matter of thinking and acting, and what changes people, that needs to be emphasized, and that is the power of positive acting.

The right kind of acting can and does have a profound effect on our Christian faith and growth. It is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting. Listen to that again: It is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting! Or to put it another way, act the way you want to be, and you will soon be the way you act!

The power of positive acting! This is the way Jesus worked and lived, and it is still the way God works. Thus, our purpose this morning is to try to better understand how this power of acting works and to see how God can and does work through our acting to change not only our thoughts but our lives.

God Himself is a God of action and not just a God of thoughts or mind. The Bible is the record of the acts of God in history and tells how these acts are working to change us and the world.

But let's begin by considering first the power of positive acting in our everyday lives and experiences, and then we'll see how all of this applies to our Christian faith.

Most of us, I suppose, have read the story called Beauty and the Beast. The girl, you remember, had to marry a monster for some reason. And she did. But she loved him and treated him as if he were a human being, and then, much to her relief, he really turned into a man, and all went well. Another story with a similar theme is about someone who had to wear a mask — a mask which made him look much nicer than he really was. He had to wear it for years, and then when he took it off, he found his own face had grown to fit it. He was now really handsome. What had begun as a disguise had become a reality. Now, of course, if he had been forced to wear a very ugly mask, he would've become much uglier than he had been in the first place.

There is a power, an influence, in positive acting and also a similar power in negative acting, which actually causes changes within us. We've all said to our children when they are fussy with long faces, "Be careful, your face might freeze that way." Behind such a statement is the principle that if you look fussy and act crabby most of the time, you will soon become that kind of person.

Most of the women here know that if you're feeling low and out of sorts, one way of changing your mood is not just by trying to think positive thoughts — you may think all you want sometimes, and your mood still won't change. So, what do you do? You get all dressed up, go out of the house, and go on a shopping spree. In the comic strips, the woman on such occasions usually buys a new hat, but it doesn't have to be a hat. What is happening is that you are literally acting yourself into a new way of thinking.

Or for some women, I'm told on good authority, a visit to the hairdresser can accomplish a similar change of mood and thought. Again, action is taken, your physical makeup is altered, and part of the secret here, of course, is that you are made to look different, and so you begin to feel different.

So, one way to change our mood, our feelings, is to change our outward appearance by changing our clothes, cleaning up, or maybe taking a ride or a walk. Such actions can change our entire attitude.

When I was in college, it was the custom to dress up for dinner each evening with a coat and tie for the men. This not only made us look better, but because of this action of making ourselves look better, we acted better all the way around, and even our thoughts were better.

We all know how we begin to feel different when we get all dressed up to go out to some fancy affair. We can see the truth of the old saying that to a certain extent, "clothes make the person." If we want to truly relax, we need to put on comfortable, relaxing clothes. We've heard people say, "When I put on this outfit, my whole mood is different, I feel like a different person." Or if you dress up in a costume like a certain kind of character, you may find yourself actually beginning to feel like that kind of character. Such is the power of acting, positive or negative, and it applies to every area of our living.

Along this same line, but on a deeper level, we've heard people say, "You can't legislate morality." Or others have said, meaning the same thing, "The only way to change people is not through laws, but to change their inward feeling and attitudes."

But where such statements miss the point is that one way of changing a person's or a whole group's attitudes and feelings is through the help of rules and laws. These rules and laws cause us to act differently, and pretty soon we will find ourselves, as a result of our acting, thinking differently. Our inward attitude undergoes a change.

Over the years, because of new laws and rules, a subtle change has been taking place inside of persons in their attitudes and prejudices. Laws have caused people of different races to attend school together, to be able to eat in the same restaurants, and to stay in the same motels. As a result, attitudes and thoughts are changing. No matter what the opponents say, to a certain extent, morality is being legislated all the time — sometimes good morality and sometimes not so good. The law is a teacher and a very important one.

In the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments certainly changed the attitudes of people over a period of time. You can't legislate morality immediately, but over a span of time, these commandments and others have helped us to act ourselves into a new way of thinking. It goes on all the time. One lawyer put it this way: "I have long observed that the law tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy; that is, a statute tends to create a climate of opinion favorable to its own enforcement."

Thus, because of this principle, good laws and rules have helped us move from primitive barbarism to a higher level of civilization. We have often made progress simply because some things have been outlawed. And in time, this does change attitudes.

In our own country in the past several decades, by legislative action, executive order, and judicial decree, the racial prejudices of Americans have increasingly been denied public sanction. Legal prohibition of discrimination in such areas as employment, the armed forces,

housing, professional associations, and public accommodations has brought people of various races and religions together in normal day-to-day contact on an equal-status basis. Such contact has given them the opportunity to know one another as individual human beings with similar interests, aspirations, problems, and capabilities. We have been acting ourselves into a new way of thinking.

This happens in many of our personal relationships. Charles Lamb, the English writer, once said, “Don’t introduce me to that man, for I want to go on hating him, and I’m afraid that if I get to know him, I may no longer be able to hate him.” He knew he could be acted into a new way of thinking.

Thus, such is the power of positive acting that you and I can make good use of it on our own in every area of our living.

It will be found useful in such simple things as helping to change us from being unfriendly to friendly. Even though you think you feel unfriendly, try acting friendly toward all whom you meet, and you will find yourself becoming a friendly-type person. It will be difficult at first, and you may find that you have to force yourself, but if you continue, you will discover the power of positive acting. Furthermore, the power is such that those whom you meet will also begin to become friendly.

You can become a thankful person by beginning to act thankful, by the act of beginning to write thank-you notes, and other actions as well.

You may ask, “What’s the good of pretending to be what you are not?” And of course, there is a bad kind of pretending, such as when a person pretends he is going to help you instead of really helping you. But there is also a good kind of pretending and acting that we are talking about in this sermon. In fact, very often the only way to get a quality in reality is to start behaving as if you had it already. That is why children’s games are so important. They are always pretending to be grown-ups, playing house, playing store. But all the time they are hardening their muscles and sharpening their wits, so that the pretense of being grown-up helps them to actually grow up in earnest. And it’s the same for all of us.

Have you noticed that getting started on something is often the hardest part of anything? That’s why there’s truth in the old saying, “A job begun is a job half done!”

I find, for example, in writing sermons, that the hardest part is in getting started. I think I have so many good ideas and thoughts. But still, to get started, to take action, to put down that first word, that’s the most difficult part of all.

If I just sit back and think, I’ll never get any real inspiration and not get much done either. But once I begin, then the inspiration almost always follows, but I have to act, I have to start. Simply to have nice positive thoughts is not enough.

Now, what’s all this got to do with our Christian faith? A great deal. Our faith is concerned with our changing and growing, and the power of positive acting is involved in our becoming and growing as a Christian. It’s a part of faith itself.

Many times, we begin as Christians with only a little bit of faith, but then as we begin to act as Christians, our faith grows, and we grow.

When Jesus called the first twelve disciples, they didn't wait, and Jesus didn't wait until they all had the right positive thoughts and a mature, well-worked-out faith. He said, "Follow me!" and they followed him. To be sure, they were impressed by Jesus and had some small bit of faith in him. But it was then in the act of following him and working with him that their faith increased. They were literally acting themselves into a new way of thinking. They were acting themselves into a whole new way of life.

The Bible is a book of verbs, of action. God said to Abraham, "Go, from your country." God said to Moses, "Go down to Egypt and free my people." Over and over again, we read of persons acting in response to God.

When Jesus met people who needed help, he used the power of positive acting. In the healing miracles, there was always some kind of action required on the part of the persons being healed. "Rise up and walk!" "Pick up your bed and walk!" "Go show yourselves to the priest!" "Go sell what you have and give the money to the poor!" "Bring the boy to me!"

The fifth book in the New Testament is not called the Thoughts of the Apostles but the Acts of the Apostles.

To a certain extent, the first step we take is always on faith, and then when we continue to act, to try to follow God's will, the acting increases our faith. So, faith comes not only by hearing God's word but also by acting on it.

Isn't this the meaning of the statement in the Bible when the person said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief." If we make the start, on our tiny faith, then our faith increases as we continue to act on our faith.

People have discovered this power of positive acting in such things as giving money for the work of the church and in attending church services. We learn to love what we give and work for. We don't get the love first and then begin to give. Neither can we always wait for the inspiration to give; but as we take the action and begin to give, then we find ourselves changing.

In Paul's letters, there is a similar emphasis. We are told that we arrive at Christian maturity by acting, by actually sharing Christ's ministry in the world, by working alongside him and letting him work in and through us. We are told to "put on Christ;" and it's the same principle. As we begin to act like Jesus, then more and more we find ourselves becoming like him.

And then something else happens. By our beginning to act, we find the power of God alongside us and helping us, and that's where the real power of positive acting comes from in all areas of life. As we begin to act, even though our faith is weak at the beginning, God is at our side, turning our acting into reality. And pretty soon, it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us.

This has been the experience of millions of Christians, and it can be our experience also. Such is the power of positive acting. Try it! Try the power of positive acting. Even though none of us have all the answers about life; even though we don't have it all worked out theologically; even though our faith may be quite small. We can begin to act, to follow, knowing that in our acting, we will experience the power of God as we have never experienced it before. And in the process, we will find ourselves changing for the better. Amen.