Sunday, February 15, 1981
A WAY TO CHANGE
Mark 1:14-20

Most of us have something about us that we would like to change. Some want to change their personality, others their looks, and still others their behavior. Here's a young man who wants to become a better basketball player. Here's someone else who wants to change into a better student. Here's a person who wants to change so that he or she is liked and respected by others. There are those who want to lose weight, or stop smoking, or kick the alcohol habit. Here's a person who wants to improve her skills so that she can get a promotion in her work. Here's another person who wants to deepen his spiritual life and become a more caring, loving, grateful person.

Every day, Jesus Christ met people who wanted to change for the better. And he gave them the secret of what to do. The same secret will work for any one of us. The secret is this: ACTION! It is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking, than to think yourself into a new way of action. Changing your behavior will help change your attitude. Act the way you want to be, and you will soon be the way you act.

A certain wealthy businessman who had gained a fortune in a rather ruthless fashion, found himself at mid-life in an embarrassing position. The practices by which he had made himself wealthy in the early part of the century had become socially unacceptable. People no longer admired individuals like him but tended increasingly to hold them in contempt.

This gentleman was not so much personally disturbed by this change in attitude, but his family was. His wife and daughters did not like being the objects of public disdain. It troubled them to see the family name made a synonym for brutal policies in industrial relations. They wanted the world to smile upon them when they went among ordinary people and not spit behind their backs.

So, they set about to improve his image. In the process they hired a public relations man to help. The father went along with the plan but didn't want to make any substantive changes in his ways but merely an appearance of improvement. After studying the problem carefully, the public relations man announced that he would undertake the job, but only if the client modified. his more outrageous behavior somewhat. He at least wanted the tycoon to go through the motions ordinarily associated with social conscience.

The man complained a bit, but began to try new behavior. He agreed to sponsor a couple of national charities, pre- tended to be interested in the home life of his employees, spoke in a kindly manner to his neighbors, and covered his hand more carefully when destroying the competition. All this he did with the worst intentions in the world.

But then a strange thing happened. The great pretender began to enjoy the new lifestyle to which he had committed himself only superficially. It felt good, he found, to be liked, to have people smile at him in the streets, speak approvingly of him at their clubs and seek him out as an ally in their causes. His wife and daughters loved it too so that his home became a happier p1ace.

In short, the man had discovered the power of positive acting, a way to change. He was being transformed by his acting differently. What began as pretending actually produced an authentic change in his view of himself and how he saw the world — a change for the better.

The right kind of acting can and does have a profound effect on the kind of person we become. We can often make our muscles do what our brain at first fears to do, and then if we keep at it, our thinking will follow along.

Jesus Christ knew this. He didn't wait until a person's thinking was right, or until an individual had the correct theology before he invited someone to follow him. "Follow me," he said, and then in the following, the individual began to change. This happened with Peter and James and John and countless others.

We've all used this principle in many ways and often with-out being aware of it. If an individual is depressed, she will get all dressed up and go shopping. Soon she has acted herself into a new way of thinking. Another person will take action and begin a project of some sort which he has been thinking about but putting off. As soon as he begins to act in a new way, his thinking will follow suit. That's why we say, "Beginning is half done."

All of us know how our feelings and attitude begin to change when we change our outward appearance. To get in a party mood, we dress up in party clothes. To get into a relaxed mood, it helps if we wear relaxing clothes.

On a deeper level, the power of positive acting is saying that our muscles can lead and train our minds. Thus, taking a brisk walk can help us deal with nervous exhaustion. A physician told me that he would never forget the feeling he got one winter night, as he walked along the deserted streets after many hours in the hospital. He suddenly realized that he didn't feel tired or cold. All the worries about his patient's illnesses, as well as his own personal cares, seemed to recede with each step. The profound fatigue that he'd experienced as he left the hospital seemed to evaporate into the atmosphere as he walked along.

The power of positive acting can help in dealing with an obsession. There was a woman who suffered tremendously from jealousy. Even though she knew deep down that her husband was faithful, she could not shake off the thought that he was unfaithful. Without being aware of it, she was reinforcing the thought of jealousy with her muscular actions. She would rummage through the pockets of her husband's clothes at night to search for evidence of his unfaithfulness. If she had been gone from the house for a time, when she returned, she would search the house for some object which would prove that her husband had had a visitor while she was gone. She spied on her husband's activities, checked continually on his whereabouts and when he arrived home in the evening, she would question him incessantly with her suspicions. She was acting in a jealous way with every muscle in her body. Every search, every act of watching, every series of questions only intensified her obsession and kept her mind on the idea that he was unfaithful.

What she had to do was train her muscles not to ask questions, not to search, not to telephone her husband's office. So, she worked out a scheme of muscle retraining, a series of exercises which helped her to begin to act as a person who wasn't jealous. After a few weeks, her obsession began to diminish, and finally left completely. Her muscles led her thinking, and she was a changed person.

If one is teaching a child that one plus one equals two, it is not enough to explain it. It is necessary to give the child a pencil and paper and have her write “one plus one equals two.” The action reinforces the learning. There is even evidence that our muscles will remember things that our mind has apparently forgotten.

The power of positive acting is at work in the healing process. Today if one has surgery, it is better if the patient begins to use his muscles as soon as possible. Recovery from surgery includes getting out of bed and beginning to walk as soon as possible. Not too many years ago a simple appendectomy meant staying in bed for at least two weeks. Now we know that it is beneficial to get the patient actively involved in the healing process as soon as possible. The more the patient begins to act well, the sooner he or she gets well. The more respon-sibility the patient begins to take for his or her own health, the faster healing will occur.

The most effective teachers and leaders throughout history have known about and used the power of positive acting to help people change and to accomplish change for the better throughout society. They know that an idea or a commitment amounts to very little until one begins to act on it.

One day when a young man asked Jesus, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus did not tell him to go away and meditate or think about it; rather he said: “Sell all you have, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me. When Jesus called his disciples, he called them into action. “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. Often as Jesus healed a person, he would give instructions for action — “Go and show yourselves to the priest.” “Rise, take up your bed and walk.” “Go and sin no more.” He wanted the people to “claim the healing.” Act in a new way and you will become a new person.

Ghandi of India led his people to freedom through non-violent action and got millions of the Indian people involved in the action, and they were changed for the better in the process.

On March 12, 1930, Ghandi, accompanied by 78 men and women set out on foot on a two-hundred mile walk to the sea. There they planned to defy the government by making salt from seawater in disobedience to the Salt Act, which provided for a government monopoly of the manufacture of salt, levied a tax on its sale, and prohibited Indians from making it themselves.

The Salt March was a symbolic act, a teaching demonstration which was instrumental in uniting the Indian people in opposition to the British. The British authorities treated it as a joke, but it was much more than that. As Ghandi and his followers marched across the country the procession soon became a triumphal march. In nearly every settlement, hundreds abandoned their work and joined the procession until the original band of less than one hundred swelled to several thousand by the time the sea was reached.

On the evening of April 5, 1930, they reached the sea. The next day, Ghandi waded into the sea, bathed, and purified himself in the Hindu custom. Then he picked up some salt which had been left by the waves on the beach. In so doing he had broken the “salt law.” The word went out from scores of reporters to their newspapers all over India and the world.

Overnight the country was aroused. Thousands, then tens of thousands swarmed to the beaches of India’s lengthy coast to defy the government by making salt. It was the salt march that caught the imagination of millions of Indians and aroused them to defy the British. People got involved in the action and acted themselves into a new way of thinking.

Jesus Christ shows us that the power of positive acting can be put into practice in each one of our lives.

1. The first step in putting the power of positive acting to work in your own life is to set up a certain discipline or schedule for yourself. This is the first action. If a person wants to become a long-distance runner, then he or she has to set up the proper discipline to become one which means scheduling a certain amount of running to be done each day. It means making the muscles of the body run a scheduled distance each day, even on those days when one doesn't feel like it.

This matter of discipline applies to every area of positive acting. There will be no basic or lasting change in one's life without it. Discipline means, above all, not giving into one's feelings of the moment. It means not operating in a state of illusion or muddled awareness.

2. Secondly, in order to make a basic change in your life, become involved or join with others who are working to make a similar change. If, for example, you want to lose weight, then join with others who are working toward the same goal. If you want to deepen your spiritual life, then join the prayer group. If you are a student and want to improve your grades, then begin to associate yourself with those who are also working for the same goal.

When you join the Christian Church, you are becoming part of a community of people who are committed to following Jesus Christ in their lives, people who want to change for the better and who are working in order that society will change for the better.

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 and change. Faith comes not only by hearing God's word, but also by acting on it.

When we begin to act, then we soon find the power of God alongside us and within us. This has been the experience of millions of Christians and it can be your experience also.