

DOING
by
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delivered at Ridgecrest '86
November 14, 1986

Theme: The Church God is Calling Us
To Be: Being, Doing, Telling

"Who do you say that I am?"

At a crucial turning point in his ministry, on the road to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus turned to his disciples and asked, "Who do men say that I am?"

Then he went on to the more significant question, "Who do you say that I am?"

I think that is the question each of us must answer for ourselves - and, my friends, pay the cost of our answer - as Peter had to by being made to face what it meant to follow God's Messiah, God's Christ.

I think the question still reverberates down the corridors of time to each of us today, and I think the answer still has cost. Our answers may be different - I do not believe we all have to think alike. I think it is our fearfulness that makes us find security only in uniformity.

I think creation bears witness to the fact that God delights in diversity:

Glory be to God for dappled things...
(sang the deeply religious poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins)
All things counter, original, spare, strange...
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Our answer to the question, who do you say that I am?, is our Gospel, and the Gospel is always the Gospel according to...

Each of the Evangelists answers the question differently - gives a different picture of Jesus, but all portraits come to the cross.

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

In Acts Luke gives us an exciting picture of an unusual experience at the Jewish celebration of Pentecost. Jews were in Jerusalem

from all about the ancient world, and suddenly there was ecstasy in that little band that had been with Jesus. The visitation of the Holy Spirit was marked by wind and fire and wondrous communication.

In amazement the other Jews asked what was happening.

Peter rose up to tell them in a classic sermon that recounted the action of God throughout all history culminating in the act of God in Jesus of Nazareth, made by God both Lord and Christ.

What shall we do? they cried.

The Bible is a book of mighty questions. Karl Barth said the Bible is not a book of answers. It is the Book in which God asks us the questions.

The Bible is a book of mighty questions.

"What shall we do?" they cried in response to Peter's sermon.

I think Peter was luckier than most modern preachers. No one shook his hand at the door and told him they enjoyed the sermon, and so far as Luke's record goes, no one ducked out the side door to avoid dealing with him at all. "What shall we do?" they cried.

Peter told them to repent and be baptized.

We have been baptized. We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

And the question still is, What shall we do? And the answer still comes, "If you would come after me, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me."

At the gathering of the Second Province in June of this year, I heard the Bishop of Central New York, O'Kelley Whitaker preach what for me was a profound sermon on that text.

He began by distinguishing between a Cross and a thorn in true Pauline style. "A thorn for the Christian," he said is an involuntary burden or affliction which must be borne in some form or other. "Through it," said Bishop Whitaker, "we learn to depend on God. A cross, by contrast, is a Christian's voluntary self-denial in following the will of God for his or her life."

As an example for today, Bishop Whitaker quoted Allan Boesak, the minister of the Coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa and the President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The Rev. Mr. Boesak says, "If I were not a Reformed Christian, it would be tempting to find a college position in the United States and stay out of the struggle in South Africa. God know I've tried." But for him the confession "Jesus Christ is Lord" gets in the way.

"Once you affirm Jesus Christ is Lord," he says, "you relativize whatever else presumes lordship in the world, including the state, flag, bomb, school, personal goals - even the church."

I submit to you that is the heart of the meaning of Jesus' temptation experience.

Listen to it.

Jesus had just had the powerful experience of the baptismal confirmation of who he was - "You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased."

He knew who he was. He understood the calling and the commission. Jesus knew the Scriptures. He understood what chosenness meant. He knew election meant election for God's purposes.

He knew that God's purpose was to restore all creation to its at one relationship with God, the triumph of the Kingdom of God.

How should this be done?

Jesus lived in a world in which there were many answers to that question. What would be his?

Albert Nolan of the Dominican Order in South Africa has written a disturbing and challenging little book called Jesus Before Christianity. At the very beginning of the book, Nolan sets out the thesis that Jesus faced a world trembling on the brink of unparalleled disaster as ours is.

"Our age," says Nolan, "is characterised by problems that are a matter of life and death, not only for individuals, not only for whole nations, races and civilizations, but a matter of life and death for the entire human race." Nolan is not talking just about the nuclear menace but about the population explosion, the diminishing of our natural resources and food supplies, the pollution of the environment, and the escalation of violence.

Nolan says solutions can be found to all these problems, "but these solutions require such radical and such dramatic changes in the values, concerns, thought-patterns, and standards of living of so many people, especially in the dominant rich countries that most observers regard them as virtually impossible."

Jesus also faced a world gone mad.

There were those who had found their answers. The Sadducees made their adjustments to the status quo. The zealots took up arms. The Pharisees withdrew into exclusive holiness.

All of these possibilities were possibilities for Jesus.

Let us look at the temptation stories as Luke recounts them.

Luke has been our Gospel for this year. Luke is a great story teller, and Luke obviously wrote to win over the prevailing authority, and his picture of Jesus is winsome - not the thunder bolt of Mark in eschatological haste, not the majestic rabbi of Matthew, not the sublime Word made flesh of John - but the friend of the outcasts and the lowly, the inspirer of the "gentle Jesus, sweet and mild," but Renan mistread Luke's Jesus, as we shall see.

Luke insightfully begins the temptations with the fact that Jesus had eaten nothing during the forty days of wrestling with the meaning of his call and observes that when they were ended, he was hungry.

The moment of physical deprivation is a moment of vulnerability.

I know a lovely young woman who is caught in a destructive job situation and there now comes the chance for another job with creative possibilities for mind and body and soul. She is very eager to get it. "I'd kill for that job!" she declares recklessly. Of course, she wouldn't, but the temptation is there.

It is always there at our point of weakness.

It was there for Jesus. The first thing the devil does is to cast doubts on his experience of authenticity - "If you are the Son of God -" Did you really have any such experience? Did you just imagine it? What proof of it do you have now? Did you just wish for it so much you believe it actually happened? If - If - If -

All right let's assume it did happen. Use the power. Use it for good. There are thousands of your people out there starving. Feed them.

Now that is a temptation we well fed fat cats can easily resist for other people. We can say they are lazy, they are over-dependent, they haven't been intelligent enough to use their resources well, no one needs to be hungry in this great land of plenty - we can even say "Man shall not live by bread alone," as Jesus did.

The great difference is Jesus was hungry.

An African proverb says, "Full belly child cannot say to empty-belly child, "Be of good cheer. Only empty-belly child can say to empty-belly child, "Be of good cheer."

Jesus also did not say, "Man shall not live by bread." He said, "Man shall not live by bread alone."

There is something more important than our good deeds. The medieval Church in its morality play Everyman missed that point. Our good deeds have no claim to absoluteness. We can do the right thing for the wrong reason, as T. S. Eliot understood. We can bestow all our goods to feed the poor, as the King James translates St. Paul, and have no love.

We can do many good deeds without love.

How many of us work in soup kitchens and do time in shelters for the homeless and have no love - no compassion for the victims of the system?

How many of us feed the hungry and never check out the work of Bread for the World or know anything about what Food First is doing - efforts at a systemic approach to the issue of hunger.

Under the title "And not so gladly Teach", Herbert Kohl reviewed two recent books by young whites detailing their experiences teaching in Black schools. His review was devastating, and one of the authors objected, but he does hit the weakness of the do-gooders. Kohl said, "We learn that the teacher is sympathetic to the victims, but we get no sense that he will act with them against the system. Several things emerge from these two books. First, many teachers who consider themselves liberal and decent people witness racism and incompetency all the time and don't speak out against them."

The indictment against these teachers has its counterparts against all who think that doing good is just a matter of individual good deeds - private charity.

How many of us who visit the prisoners ever explore the work of the Fortune Society or the Southern Coalition against Jails and Prisons or the processes of our judicial system?

How many of us who visit the sick and afflicted ever ask some serious questions about our medical system and our care for the elderly and the infirm?

We can do good deeds because it makes us feel good, because we can garner a reputation for saintliness, because we are working our way into heaven, because everyone else we know is doing it, because we need to assuage our guilt, because, because, because...

Jesus was not seduced by any of that.

So the devil tried again. He showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me..."

That to me is one of the most chilling insights of Scripture. The kingdoms of this world belong to the devil. Some people think the devil was lying. I do not think so. The devil says, "I will give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me..."

Do you really think he was lying?

The kingdoms of this world will be yours if you will worship the devil. Exalt his Satanic Holiness. Buy into his standards. Accept his values.

Lo, the hosts of evil round
us
Scorn thy Christ, assail his
ways
From the fears which long have
bound us
Free our hearts to faith and praise
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage
For the living of these days.

Jesus said, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."

Ah, my friends, what does it mean to worship the Lord and serve only him?

As the ancient prophets of Israel understood, it means far more than ritual religion.

You remember Amos who probably said it most memorably,

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though you offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; for I will not hear the melody of your viols. But let justice run down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

Do not be deluded into any state of ease because the rituals are outmoded. You can substitute, without blunting the issue, the elements of our liturgy.

And not only Amos. Isaiah:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord. I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of the beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of the goats.

When you come before me, who has required this at your hand, to tread my courts?

Bring me no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn assembly.

Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble to me; I am weary of them.

And when you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; yea, when you make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood.

Learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge for the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Jeremiah.

Stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim
there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord,
all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to
worship the Lord,

Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend
your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to
dwell in this place.

Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of
the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the
Lord.....

And James, the most Jewish tract in the New Testament, warns, "A
double minded man is unstable in all his ways."

Purify your hearts, you double minded, says Kierkegaard.

In the temptation of the kingdoms of this world, we are most
doubleminded.

We blithely use the term God and country, unmindful of the fact
that the very equation is blasphemy.

"To whom then will ye liken God?" the prophet understood, "or to
whom - or to what shall God be equal?"

The pretensions of the nations to absolute power and authority are
without limit, and woe to those who question that.

Conscientious objectors are seen only as a threat to the nation's
military might.

The Sanctuary movement is seen only as a threat to the nation's
economy.

The exercise of dissent is seen only as a threat to the nation's
authority.

Rudyard Kipling, a most fervent son of the empire, had one moment
of seeing another possibility and never was in high favor again,
but his moment left us a salutary word:

For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard.
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding, calls not thee to guard,
For frantic beast and foolish word -
Thy mercy on thy people, Lord.

You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.

Jesus was called to serve another Kingdom than the kingdoms of this
world.

But the devil was not through. Unlike Matthew, Luke puts this temptation last. I think his order is incisive, for to me it is the most subtle temptation of all, and the one to which a devout child of God would be most likely to succumb. The temptation to religion.

The devil takes him to Jerusalem, the holy city, and to the temple, the holiest place in the holy city. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you" and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."

Oh, not everyone who quotes Scripture is on the Lord's side. The devil can cite Scripture - and most effectively.

Think of the power of that temptation. It's God's own promise. You with one act can prove you trust God and can demonstrate that God is trustworthy.

You can also show the world how special you are.

May God in God's great mercy forgive us for the many ways and many times we succumb to that temptation!

Subtly, so subtly, but so surely we seek to cash in on our chosenness. How that temptation affects our prayer life! How that temptation affects our judgment of other people!

How disturbing to us is Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican. The Pharisee knew he was special. Let us not try to demean him. He was a good man by all the standards of ritual religion. He scrupulously kept the Law. He did even better than that. He exceeded the requirements of the Law. He was an exemplary church member. And he thought he ought to get some credit for that. At the least he expected a pat on the back. At the most he expected God to value him above the publican. One of the traps of considering ourselves special-special to God is that we get to thinking our ideas are God's ideas. Of course we don't put it exactly that way. We piously murmur that God's ideas are our ideas, but let someone object to our ideas! Think about that - and back to Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the publican. The shocking thing about the story is that the one who made on claim to specialness - and indeed had no right to - he had betrayed both God and his people - Jesus said he went down justified - he went back home in right relationship with God. We like to carry the story further and talk about the changed life of the publican - he became a good person-just like the Pharisee? But the story ends there. What happened to the publican later is not significant to the story. What is significant is he did not presume on his relationship with God.

Jesus' reply to Satan. "You shall not put God to the test."

So the devil lost round one. Luke wisely observes, the devil departed from him until an opportune time.

So Jesus leaves his hour of decision-making with no program - but with a great commitment. God will be first in his life.

He may not know what he is going to do, but he knows very well what he is not going to do. Nothing will come ahead of God. We know he went on to feed the hungry - thousands upon thousands of them. We know he claimed his power. "All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth," he said. We know he participated in the religious rites of his people. He was in the synagogue as his custom was on the Sabbath.

But none of this took the place of God.

God will be first.

Every act will be subject to the test. Does it make God's perfect will for God's creation known? Does it announce that the Kingdom of God is at hand?

Jesus went from the temptation experience to do the work he had been called to do. In the synagogue at Nazareth, he preached his inaugural sermon. As the guest preacher he laid out his program:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news
to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

The program came from the ancient wisdom of his people.

It also may have come from his mother. I heard Jim Forbes, a Black Pentecostal preacher who is now teaching homiletics at Union Theological Seminary - if you ever get a chance to hear him run don't walk! Jim was talking about the formation of Jesus in his mother's arms - the love between those two - how she cradled him and nurtured him - I like to think she sang what must of been one of her favorite songs.

He has scattered the proud in
the imagination of their hearts
He has brought down rulers from their
thrones
And exalted those of low degree
He has filled the hungry with good things
And the rich he has sent empty away.

We the rich can spiritualize that away if we want to, but to the descendants of Israelites slaves who remembered a God who had acted for them against Pharaoh, it was a historical fact.

The people of Israel had a long, long memory reaching back to the creation of the world of what God was like and what God desired for

God's creation and how God had acted to make God's will known.

God's will for creation is good.

God loves the creation and all that is therein. We remember that reality in our Ash Wednesday collect - God hateth nothing that God has made.

The world doesn't understand that, and God called a peculiar people to make that fact known to the world. In Abraham God called a special people that their specialness might be a blessing for all humankind. But that special people lost its way. The Biblical record is that God did not give up.

Again and again you called us to return, the eucharistic prayer has it. Through prophets and sages you revealed your righteous Law. And in the fulness of time you sent your only Son, born of a woman, to fulfill your Law, to open for us the way of freedom and peace.

One interpretation of the temptation stories is that Jesus, the representation of the chosen people, passed through the wilderness through which the chosen people passed, met every temptation not to acknowledge the Lordship of the creator, and resisted each temptation where the children of Israel failed.

The vision of their call was never completely lost, however, for the children of Israel. The prophets kept it fresh for them and that vision Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Lord, lifted up at the beginning of his earthly ministry.

The kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of this world. Its values are different; its standards are different; its manner of operating is different. "My kingdom is not of this world" means my Kingdom is not like this world. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray "Thy kingdom come on earth-

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done on earth....

he was calling for a new allegiance. Nolan says, "Nothing that Jesus ever said would lead one to think that he might have used this term in a non-political sense.

Certainly the people of his day did not think so. They understood he was challenging the very structures of society. Church and state combined to do away with him.

When Jesus left his temptation experiences, with his absolute allegiance God's alone, he was on a collision course with the powers of this world.

The Cross is sign and symbol. It is a symbol of God's great love for us. It is a sign of the cost of our response to that love.

If you would come after me, deny yourself,
and take up your cross and follow me.

It was said of the early Christians, "These are they who have turned the world upside down."

Doing is a matter of turning the world upside down.

A newspaper article about a Vietnam veteran who fasted for forty days on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, D. C. to call attention to what he considered a wrongheaded policy in Nicaragua was subtitled, "Making a statement with his life".

Doing is a matter of making a statement with your life. Doing is a matter of marching to another drummer than the world's grasping for security, safety, respectability, exclusiveness.

I understand Madelene L'Engle has posed the sharp question, "if you were arrested as a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

Remember the early Christians went to the lions not because they had religious practices different from the majority - Rome was very tolerant of all kinds of religious practices. The early Christians went to the lions because they would not admit the Lordship of Caesar. They knew the difference between God and Caesar. We get them very much confused. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's is not talking about the separation of church and state. It is talking about ultimate loyalties.

In Bolt's play, A Man for all Seasons, after the execution of Thomas More, who would not adjust his faith to the prevailing authority, the Common Man, an ingenious character creation who had been all things to all people, says slyly to the audience,

I'm breathing...Are you breathing too? It's nice, isn't it? It isn't difficult to keep alive, friends - just don't make trouble - or if you must make trouble, make the sort of trouble that's expected...

Robert McAfee Brown has written an upsetting little book called Unespected News, Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes. He includes a Third World theologian's reading of Matthew 25:

(He) clearly challenges the unspoken assumption that Jesus' vision proposes tests of individual responsibility: Did I visit the sick? Did I provide food for the hungry? Did I enlist in any efforts to help prisoners? Third World Christians are telling us to look at the text again and ask ourselves, Who are gathered before the Son of Man to be separated from one another? The answer we usually give, "Individuals whose personal lives are under scrutiny," is simply wrong. Jesus changes the answer. Listen. "Before him will be gathered all the nations. The vision is not about individual accountability but about corporate accountability.

Brown poses the question:

Does our nation feed the hungry?

It was the late President Dwight D. Eisenhower who said, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed."

Brown goes through each of the questions with equally disquieting results.

We might protest that we are not responsible for what the nation does, that we do not even know what goes on in the decision making bodies of the land, that the issues are too complicated for us to understand.

So we leave it all to the kingdoms of this world - and die comfortably in our beds.

Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, cried out,

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!

Jesus of Nazareth said, "I am come to set fire upon the earth, and would that it were already burning!" It is not a curse to be chosen to confront the kingdoms of this world with the Kingdom of God. It is a high and holy calling.

He calls us to follow.

We talk much about love, but Paul Tillich reminds us love, power, and justice are one in their created natures. In existence they are separated and conflicting; but love without power and justice is sentimentality - "If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, Go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" Power without justice and love is brutality. Witness the Inquisition. Human beings tearing apart the bodies of other human beings for their souls' sakes. Justice without love and power is irrelevant. Intellectual theorizing. Tillich says love, power, and justice are one in the divine ground, and they shall become one in human existence. The holy in which they are united shall become holy reality in time and space. The kingdom of God.

Jesus calls us to follow. Sound the trumpet call.

It would be a weak symphony with only violins. There would be sweetness and joy, anguish and torment, too, surely clatter and fun, but no rousing call to action, no stirring of the blood to right the ancient wrongs, no courageous daring to fail in a mighty cause.

If you would come after me, deny yourself, and take up your cross and follow me.