

What Will You Do?

Ephesians 2:1-10

The story is told of a young priest from Mississippi in the 1960's who came to see the well-known contemplative writer Thomas Merton. He was looking for direction and how to deal with all the guilt he was feeling about the rampant discrimination that was present in the churches of his state. "I just don't know what to do." Merton, as usual, gave some gentle and pastoral advice: "Don't do a damned thing! Take the time to become what you say you are, then you'll know what to do."

(John Howard Griffin, *Thomas Merton: The Hermitage Years*)

Like that priest, when faced with a difficult situation, the first response for many of us is to "do something." Some problems do require quick and straight-forward action, but not as many as we might think. The big challenges of our lives, in which we so much want to do something, fix something, and take some clear and decisive action, are the very times we need to stop and remember who we are. When we remember who we are at our core, then our actions will reflect our deeper wisdom in partnership with God.

Merton's advice reflected the teaching and the life of Jesus and of other spiritual leaders who also recognized the importance of being as the foundation for doing. The modern day spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle said essentially the same thing as Merton: "Doing is never enough if you neglect Being. [If you believe that] by doing more and more you will eventually accumulate enough 'doings' to make yourself feel complete, you won't! You will only lose yourself in doing."

(Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth*, 103)

Christian faith is lived in the tension between being and doing. The balance shows up in messages of different New Testament books. The epistle of James tells us we need to "be doers of the Word and not hearers only," and that "faith without works is dead." The *doing* of James is balanced by other books, such as Ephesians, that tell us we need to *be* so that we can do. Ephesians was probably not written by Paul, but likely by one of his followers. By the time of its writing, the early followers of Jesus no longer seemed to feel an urgent expectation that Jesus coming back to end the age. As a result, since they were probably not going to be leaving it in the near future, church needed to figure out how to *be* in the world.

To be living in sin meant to be serving the kingdoms of this world – the values of the kingdom of Rome -- rather than the values of the kingdom of God. Sin meant to be living wrong, with actions resulting from living the wrong way, from walking in the wrong direction. We need to turn around and walk in a new way.

The new way for us to walk is the way Jesus lived and by the values Jesus taught and lived. The author of Ephesians described this change of direction in very colorful language: "[God] took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ." Then he described the new way of living this way: "[God] picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah." Finally, he offered another powerful descriptive of a life lived following Jesus: "Now God has us where he wants

us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus.”

Waking up to the reality that we live and move and exist in God’s Spirit is not the result of any great work on our part. It is a sacred gift and even our desire to live in Christ comes from God. Salvation means being awake to this reality and choosing to live in it. Trust to live our lives along this path is faith and it, too, is a gift that is freely offered and available for each of us.

The author of Ephesians tells us, finally, that, “[God] creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.” Doing good works is the expression of life lived in the Spirit: doing what leads to peace, justice, mercy, love, and compassion both in the world around us and within s. Fatheru Richard Rohr, writing to today’s world, says something very similar:

Contemplation becomes a way of life. I don’t like to think of it so much as something I do but something I am, so I often use the phrase—the contemplative stance. It’s a way of living, moving, and being in this world.

I fully admit that we don’t live all of our twenty-four hours there. The world keeps pulling me back into the false self. Put on this hat. Put on this identity. Take on this hurt. Put on this self-importance, and we all do it, and it’s all right as long as we know how to take it back off again. (Richard Rohr from *Contemplative Prayer*)

How time flies! Just seventeen short weeks ago, right after Thanksgiving, I began a seventeen-part teaching series *Coping with Crisis: Taking Charge of Your Life*. The series concludes today. Inspiration for this series came from the book *Invitations* by Francis Dewar, a book of reflections, quotations, and exercises to help us respond to God’s invitation – God’s calling to every person.

In a nutshell, the way to cope with crisis – whether a crisis in the global economy, of global climate change, of global terrorism, or the personal and family crises around survival, meaning, and relationship that fill so much of our lives – the way to cope with crisis is to discover who you are at the core of your being and to live from that understanding. It is to discover God’s calling for our lives and live in that calling. Neither the discovering nor the living happens all at once. The discovery might not become all that clear and the living might not progress all that far for any of us, but we need to begin in order for our lives to be meaning-ful – full of meaning.

A mountain climber once wrote:

Unless one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back. The moment one commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred.”

(William Hutschinson Murray, *The Scottish Himalaya Expedition*, 1951)

And the German poet Goethe adds this challenge: “Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it: boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now!

(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

If the book of James is right, then faith without works is dead. And if we accept the wisdom of Ephesians and of many other spiritual teachers, works without faith are ultimately futile? At the end of all seeking, the question challenges each of us and all of us: “What will you do?” What action will you take with your life to express your calling?

- Do you have some idea of what God is calling you to do?
- If so, is there even a very small step you could take toward that calling? Usually only one step at a time is clear, and nothing will be clear beyond that step until you have taken it.”
- If you do not have any awareness at all of God’s calling to you, is there some task or activity that you would like to try, to see how you feel about it. (Dewar, *Invitations*, 146)

“History knows no more awesome power, nor tyranny a more fearsome opponent, than ordinary acts of courage.”
(Don Coville, *The Christian Century*)

- If you do not have any awareness at all of God’s calling to you, is there some task or activity that you would like to try, to see how you feel about it? (Dewar, 146)
- It takes courage to be open to a possibility that may one day appear
“The greatest deterrents to the potential of creativity in this world are the standards we impose on ourselves and on others, coupled with the failure to believe in our own uniqueness and our own powers.”

(Elizabeth O’Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)

The way of abundant living lies not along the way of accumulation or of grasping for more. It lies along the way of discovery and living – of trusting the truth of who we are and of what God calls us to do. It is like this story about a potter:

I used to grieve because I could not make reliably a closefitting lid for a canister, a teapot, or a casserole. Sometimes the lid fit and sometimes it did not. But I wanted it to fit and I was aggravated! Then a friend of mine sent me an ancient Korean pot – 1000 years old. I loved it at once, and then he wrote that he thought I might like it because it looked like something I might have made. Its lid didn’t fit at all! Yet it was a museum piece, so to speak. So I thought, why do I require of myself what I do not require of this pot? Its lid does not fit, but it inspires my spirit when I look at it and handle it. So I stopped worrying. Now I have very little trouble making lids that fit.

(M. C. Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*, Wesleyan 1989)

And finally, a word from Elizabeth O’Connor, the author who inspired Francis Dewar and who’s *yes* to her calling blesses us:

What stirs in our hearts will never correspond with what we are able to transpose onto paper or canvas or to shape into bridges and buildings and highways and institutions. Trying is all that matters. Our *yes* to call is saying that we will try. [And] when the book is written, or the institution built, it will fall short, no matter how much blood it costs. Then there is nothing to do but write another book, paint another picture, start another project, dream another dream, see another vision. If it has to do with the lifting up of valleys and the leveling of mountains, the supernatural aid will be given again. (Elizabeth O’Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)