

DOING LOVE
September 28, 2008
First Presbyterian Church -- Post, Texas
Matthew 21: 23-32

How many times has a church lost members because it emphasizes the importance of having the right beliefs rather than doing the right things? Frankly, it is easier for all of us who seek to follow the life-steps of Jesus to believe our faith than it is for us to live our faith. I don't know about you, but I'm often bored and annoyed by "good" Christians who say what they believe to be the right things and then act in ways that aren't even bottom-line nice!

Recently, I did a funeral of a very successful businessman who was also a kind-hearted and generous family-man. I knew this kind-hearted gentleman for several years and during one of our conversations about why he didn't go to church, he told me that dealing with church people was one of the more frustrating business situations he encountered in his sixty plus years of being a contractor. He said that it was his experience that church people often acted unethically, were sometimes late in paying their bills and usually wanted him to do a lot for them and pay him a little. When I commiserated with this dear elderly man, I told him that I

didn't know much about Christians and business dealings but that when I was a waitress, earning money to pay for college, the very worst shift to work was Sunday lunch because the good church-going people usually tipped the least!

In a sermon Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about this parable entitled, "**The Yes and No Brothers**," (found in the book, **Home By Another Way**, 1999) she states emphatically, "It was not what either boy said that mattered but what he finally did. Which brother, Jesus asked his critics, did the will of his father? It was an easy answer for them as it is for us. That was not what got Jesus killed. What got Jesus killed was the second part, when Jesus told the chief priests and elders which brother they were. They were the Yes men, he told them, who said all the right things, believed all the right things, stood for all the right things, but who would not do the right things God asked them to do."

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "They thought they were doing the right things, mind you, but they had gotten so attached to their own ideas about what those things were that it was hard for them to accept much correction. First John the Baptist and then Jesus, suggested that they trade in their beliefs for a fresh experience of God, but they could not bring themselves to do that. They said yes

to God while they acted out a great big NO to Jesus, who suggested that they might be in for a big surprise. People they despised were going into the kingdom ahead of them, Jesus told them---not instead of them, but ahead of them---people who may have said no at the beginning but who changed their minds and went, while those who refused to go continued to mistake their own convictions for obedience to God.”

This parable that Jesus told “is just one more story about hypocrisy, which has always been the number one charge leveled against religious people---namely, that we say one thing and do another, promising we will love each other on Sunday and then finding a dozen ways to slander, cheat, or just plain ignore each other on Monday.”

Yesterday I had the privilege of sharing a few stories at Jo Cash’s graveside service. Jo was an adventurous, fun-loving woman who opened her heart and home to her friends and family through the years. During gatherings at their home or festive occasions when a toast was called for, Jo was often known to offer the Cash family toast as the fun began to escalate:

“Here’s to those that do as we do and here’s to those that don’t. But to hell with those that do as we do and swear by God, that they don’t!”

How fitting the Cash’s family toast is to our passage for this morning! With Jo and A.C., there was not a lot of pretense and what you saw was what you got! Isn’t that more honest than to say one thing and then do another? After all, what we do with our lives speaks more loudly about our Christian beliefs than anything we ever say.

David Read, the late, former pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York writes in the first volume of his autobiography, **This Grace Given**, about his experience during World War II in a military internment camp where he was held prisoner. David Read writes, “It puzzled me to find that some of the most fervent evangelical believers behaved rather badly under the stress of hunger and anxiety, while those I would have considered somewhat lukewarm in what is called ‘Christian witness’ were pillars of decency and goodwill. It began to dawn on me that those who were desperately concerned with the salvation of their own souls...were also likely to be equally concerned with meeting their own physical needs. It is because of

this experience that I have reservations about all religion that tends toward the fanatical and demonstrative.”

Everyday in our work settings and home environments, we are faced with decisions, large and small, about how we will live out the faith we hold dear. In my research this week, I learned that the word “hypocrite” comes from the Greek theatre and refers to the mask that one wears to disguise one’s identity. The hypocrite was the stage face of the actor, who beneath the surface was only playing a part. Probably no accusation against a Christian is more damning than the charge that we are hypocritical, especially in light of the fact that it is probably the easiest aspect to repair. It simply calls for us to live the faith we profess. (From **“What Do You Think?”**-- A sermon preached by Jon Walton on September 25, 2005 at the First Presbyterian Church in NYC)

For me, when I think about being a good Christian and living the faith I profess, it is not about being comfortable in my life of faith or in having the right beliefs. Rather being a disciple of Jesus Christ is first and foremost about finding compassionate ways to give life and love away every day of our lives. When I look to others to be God’s presence for me, and when I seek to be God’s presence for others, what we believe about the details of the

Christian faith matters not one whit of difference in a crisis or tragedy. What matters most in our everyday encounters with our fellow struggling human beings is our ability to give and receive love. When we choose to let Jesus show in our lives, it is always much more about grace than judgment and always more about being compassionate, respectful and caring than it is about being right and certain and all-knowing.

When I was youth minister at Second Baptist Church twenty-two years ago, I met every Wednesday night with the youth Sunday school teachers to study the next Sunday's lesson. When these dedicated teachers worried about how they were going to teach the youth the great theological truths entrusted to them each Sunday, I encouraged them to relax and I assured them that they were probably not going to teach the youth much about God through their meticulous and well-scripted lesson plans. I told them many times that the youth would most likely **NOT** remember much from the lessons themselves or even the correct Christian beliefs they tried to teach. I said that the youth would remember their whole life long if they had been loved, affirmed, cherished and valued when they came to Sunday school. I always told these good teachers that if they accomplished this then they would do more to further the

youth's positive experience of God than any wise Christian teachings or beliefs that they might impart.

In the wonderful book, **Out of Africa**, Isak Dinesen tells the story of a young Kikuyu boy named Kitau who appeared at her door in Nairobi one day to ask if he might work for her. She said, yes and he turned out to be a fine servant, but after just three months he came to her again to ask her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim in Mombasa. Upset at the thought of losing him, she offered to raise Kitau's pay, but he was firm about his leaving.

Kitau told the woman he had decided he would become either a Christian or a Muslim and his whole purpose in coming to live with her had been to see the ways and habits of Christians up close. Next he would go live for three months with Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behaved and then he would make up his mind. Aghast, Dinesen wrote, "I believe that even an Archbishop, when he had had these facts laid before him, would have said, or at least thought, as I said, 'Good God, Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here!'" (As told in Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, *The Yes and No Brothers*; p. 190 in **Home By Another Way**)

I can feel Isak Dinesen's shock and vulnerability! I don't think I want anyone following me around to decide what faith they will embrace by the way I live my life! On any given day, I am not sure that my actions would speak loudly enough to convince anyone that I was a real Christian and certainly my penchant for cussing might be a hindrance for a sensitive, sheltered soul. This parable of the yes and no brothers, reminds me that my actions always speak louder than my words (something I often tell my children) and I am humbled by the fact that it is more important to have right actions than right beliefs!

The great theologian Soren Kierkegaard once said, "Jesus wants followers, not admirers!" Being a good Christian is not about being comfortable in our life of faith or in having the right beliefs. Rather being a disciple of Jesus Christ is first and foremost about finding compassionate ways to give life and love away every day of our lives.

The Presbyterian minister, John Buchanan says some profound things about living our faith in a sermon he preached entitled, **"By What Authority- Or- Who's In Charge Here?"** (9/29/02 at The Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago) "Faith, Jesus was saying, authoritative faith, goes to work in the vineyard regardless of verbal

affirmations. Faith does the work of God regardless of creeds and intellectual formulas, doctrines, or orthodoxies. Authoritative faith doesn't just talk about God. It does God's work in the world. Authoritative faith begins for us— not when we finally resolve all our theological questions: faith begins when we decide that Jesus Christ is authoritative in our life and we show up for work in the vineyard.

Authoritative faith begins when you and I hear the call of Christ to come, follow, go into the world, serve, love, laugh, rejoice, give your life away in some improbably adventure — tutor a child, embrace a homeless man, provide for a hungry and cold woman, empty your pockets, lose your very life. The authority of Jesus derives from his doing just that — showing us how to live an authentic human life by giving life away in love.”

It has been said that every night when we lie down to sleep there is either more life in this world because of us or there is less life in this world because of us. Whether or not we are a brain surgeon, a student, a millionaire, a homeless person, a farmer, a teacher, a powerful leader or a powerless victim, there is either more life in the world because of us or there is less life in the world because of us. I don't think what we choose to do with our lives matters as

much to God as the choices we make each day to use our gifts, talents, time, energies and passions in ways that connect us more fully with others and allow us to bless, serve and increase the abundance of life in our midst. Perhaps it is true that all life needs is our faithfulness!

(Some of the ideas in this last paragraph came from an old sermon I had done and quoted Barbara Brown Taylor and Rachel Remen--- author of **My Grandfather's Blessings**.)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Gracious God, we gather together on this beautiful autumn morning hoping to experience a sense of your presence in our midst that will help us to feel less fragmented and more in-tuned with the spiritual part of us that connects us more fully to ourselves, to each other and to you. O God, in the midst of our problems, busyness, distractions, work, and relationships, remind us that you are the One who continues to seek us and offer us perspective, promise, healing and hope beyond the narrow view of reality that is familiar and known to us. As we open our fragile selves and fragmented lives to your love and purposes, remind us that it is probably more important to do acts of love and kindness toward others than it is to try and live a pure and holy life that is really not much good to anybody. We pray O God, for the courage

to live lives of love and peace and generosity that reflect our gratitude to you for the gift of life we have been given and for the love and care and connections we experience in the ups and downs of life.

Please be with our friends and loved ones who are especially upset by illness, depression, grief, tragedy, or uncertainty. We give you thanks for the grand and full life of Jo Cash, for the life she has left with us and for the peace we have knowing that Jo has been released from the confines of age and disease and is now free to live anew. We pray that your comfort and care would be with Cassandra's father, David, as he seeks relief from his cancer. Give our loved ones who are hurting a sense of peace and presence that will enable them to weather the storms in their lives and come out on the other side more whole. Gather us all more fully into your love and purposes that our lives may reflect the love that has claimed us and continues to sustain us. Let us pray together...