

“Do-Bee Do-Bee Do”

A meditation based on Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1:17-27;

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

August 30, 2009

Redlands United Church of Christ

Sharon R. Graff

\* \* \* \* \*

Was it the old Protestant “work ethic?” Or was it from scripture, such as the passages we’ve read today, which all seem to focus on doing? Where did we first learn that it is more important to do than to be? More important to do than to become? That lesson—choosing doing over being—was one I first learned by watching the children’s television program *Romper Room*...now that dates me! *Romper Room* was a half-hour show that featured a recurring character—an oversized bumblebee named Mr. Doo-Bee. He had, of course, an evil twin, Mr. Don’t-Bee. Mr. Doo-Bee would bounce around the studio, and, in a rather annoying and uncreative way, he began each and every sentence with the words “Do Bee...” which were followed by some imperatives we children were to obey. “Do Bee good boys and girls for your parents...” “Do Bee quiet and kind...” “Do Bee a good student and do your homework...” By contrast, the job of “Mr. Don’t-Bee” was to show us children exactly what we should not do. The life lesson underneath the obvious moral teaching was clear: if one had to choose to do or to be, doing was the superior choice.

Scripture reiterates this ethic of doing, of activity, of busyness, almost ad nauseam. In today’s four short passages, for example, there are no fewer than 35 imperatives...now that’s a lot of doing! The author of Deuteronomy admonishes the ancients to:

- listen to the laws and teachings
- observe the laws
- don’t add anything to the law

- don't take away anything from the law
- keep the commandments
- watch themselves closely
- don't forget the teachings
- teach your children and grandchildren what is right

The psalmist adds:

- walk blameless
- do what is right
- speak truth
- do not slander
- do no evil to friends
- don't discredit a neighbor
- stand by your word
- do not lend money at interest
- do not take a bribe against the innocent

As if that's not enough, even more "doing" is added to this long list of moral imperatives by the author of the book of James:

- be generous in giving
- be quick to listen
- be slow to speak
- be slow to anger
- rid yourself of all wrongdoing
- welcome God's word into your life
- be doers of the word
- bridle your tongue

- care for orphans
- care for widows
- keep yourself from being muddied by the world

And, in your free time, that is if you were a first-century Pharisee, you added to these the following:

- wash your hands before eating
- do not eat any defiled meat
- wash all your food carefully
- use only clean pots
- wash every cup
- clean every bronze kettle

By the time we make it to the end of these four readings today, we are more than relieved to hear Jesus call most of this moral imperative hypocritical. Jesus debunks the long list of Mr. Do-Bee rules and regulations by calling on the heart, or rather, by getting to the heart of the matter. "Listen!" Jesus commands. "Understand this!" he directs. "Quit teaching your human-made rules as if they were from God! Do Bee clear about this one thing: there is nothing, nothing at all from the outside that can spoil or poison or destroy you," says Jesus... "Rather, it is those things that come out of you from within that will degrade you." Current viruses and environmental toxins aside, Jesus pointedly remarks that it is from within a person that come such things as lying, cheating, disloyalty, stealing, murder, unfaithfulness, greed, lust, pride, envy, and stupidity.

Bruce Epperly, Professor of Practical Theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary and co-pastor with Kate Epperly of a progressive, process-oriented, open and affirming congregation in Lancaster, writes on these passages from the perspective of a Christian process theology. Epperly suggests that, "Today's readings challenge 'buzzkill theologies' [so-called theologies that seek to spoil the mood or siphon off the joy]...those theologies found on the left and the

right, which presume (always) to know what's best and to enforce, subtly or directly, certain joy-less codes of conduct as essential to the life of faith."

In other words, these passages, according to Epperly, are not about simply listing rules and regulations. They can be seen as attempts to imagine and then to order community living that provides for all a community that is healthy, growing, and vibrantly full of joy. Mr. Do-Bee with his imperatives seemed to distract us from that joy-filled view initially...Let's look at three of these four passages again...quickly...to see if there can be any joy found therein.

In Deuteronomy, the context is the crossing over into the Promised Land after the 40-year wandering in the wilderness, though the text was most likely first written down hundreds of years later during the Babylonian Exile as a way to remind the people what kind of people God intended for them to be. Using strong language and vivid images, Moses cautions the people to listen carefully to the laws and ordinances that are to follow. This one phrase could be the basis for an entire meditation for in Hebrew the word translated "listen carefully" is *shema*, the same word that also refers to the most sacred of all Hebrew prayers: Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad – meaning, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

For the Jewish people, the *Shema* is a declaration of faith; it is a pledge of allegiance to One God. For over 3,000 years, citizens of the Hebrew nation have repeated this prayer upon arising in the morning and upon going to sleep at night. These same words are said when praising God from the heights of greatest joy and when crying out to God from the pit of deepest despair. Shema Yisrael – Hear O Israel...This is the first prayer that a Jewish child is taught and these are the last words a Jew prays prior to death. Shema Yisrael is repeated on Sabbaths and festivals and at the end of the holiest day of Yom Kippur. It is this prayer that is contained in the mezuzah affixed to the doorpost of a Jewish home and in the tefillin worn on Jewish arms and heads. Shema Yisrael stands alone as the singular testament of faith wherever a Jew walks or talks or resides or celebrates. Without a doubt, the Shema forms the basis for living in joy with God and with one another.

As we turn our attention to the passage from the little book of James that for its bluntness was almost excluded from the Christian canon, we can see a parallel vision of a community that lives in joy. The author minces no words in pronouncing that a community that follows God is generous; it is a community that is quick to listen and slow to speak and even slower to anger; it is a community made up of siblings who both hear and do the word of God. The passage closes with a very specific and direct example of what such a community would look like—what its economics, decision-making, and policies would include, and it is this: “to care for the orphans and widows, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” According to the author of James (writing sometime in the early 2nd century of the Common Era) a community patterned after Christ is a place in which the least, the lost, the lonely, and the last are the very groups around which any laws and ordinances are to be formed. Those who have are expected to provide for those who do not have...socialism, if you will! Such a community will be filled with joy—joy within those who give and certainly joy within those who receive.

Reading between the lines, the gospel passage echoes a similarly bold and joyful sentiment. After listing the legal expectations of community living, Jesus throws caution to the wind by exclaiming, “Pay more attention to the heart of your community, than to its human-designed rules...” For it is from the heart that comes both the destructive and the constructive. From our hearts come both despair and joy, both holding grudges and offering forgiveness, both unfaithfulness and fierce loyalty. From our hearts come lying, greediness, and the like; and from our hearts also come the seeds of joy and peace, of love and compassion.

The soil for both is within us. Which seeds will take root depends on which seeds are fed. An old legend from our nation’s First People illustrates this simple, but profound truth. The legend begins when a young child approaches the elder of the tribe with a question, “What is inside of us, O Great and Wise One?” The elder thinks for a moment, and then carefully replies, “My child, there is within each of us two hungry wolves. The first wolf is proud, unmerciful, malicious, hateful, corrupt; it is vicious, and commits atrocious acts and seeks only

its own good. The other wolf within has peace, joy, love; it is mature as it works always for the good of others; it respects and honors all creation. These two wolves seem locked in a battle, my child." The young one looks up into the kind and gentle eyes of the elder, and asks with great fascination, "Then, Wise One, which wolf will live?" to which the elder quickly responds, "That depends on which one you feed."

Which brings us back around to the art of doing and being. The four passages we've explored this morning seem to be moving us deeper than Mr. Do-Bee or Mr. Don't-Bee might allow, deeper even than the formative Protestant work ethic. While they, and their contemporary companions, seek to guilt us into following rules and regulations of community living, our scriptures invite us beyond rules and past regulations. The scriptures offer us this morning a profound choice: to do or to be. Just when we think we've decided on which of those to pursue, then with a wink and a smile, Christ nudges us both to do and to be, and thus to create together a community of great joy! To do and to be is to live by our vision of the "beloved community" in which every family is affirmed as holy and supported so that it might be healthy. To be "doers of the word" means that anger, gossip, back-biting, and greed are not tolerated here, for they destroy community and add to the woes of the world. To be and to do the word of God entails listening with delight, affirming each other with honesty, and sharing oneself in love, all of which bring joy to life in this our community of faith. As one of my teachers David Griffin once asserted, "God wants us to enjoy; God wants all of us to enjoy."

The Father of Philosophy, Socrates, is quoted as saying, "To be is to do." Twenty-three centuries later, existentialist and political activist, Jean Paul Sarte, would affirm, "To do is to be." But according to Jesus, whom we seek to follow, a better path, a path that leads to joy in community, is the path of "Do...Be...Do...Be...Do!"

Amen and Blessed Be!