

Pointing Jesus Out for Us
Mark 6:30-34 and 53-56
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
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Where can we find Jesus?

In one novel author Kurt Vonnegut references three short lines from a piece of graffiti. The first is from the Greek thinker Socrates, "To be is to do." The second is from philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, "To do is to be."

And the third harmonizes these two approaches in a light-hearted way, "Do be do be do." That last one is from the end of the old Frank Sinatra hit, "Strangers in the Night."

Being points us to some very basic spiritual questions. Who are we? What is our identity? What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be God's children, created in God's image? What does it mean to live as followers of Jesus?

Doing also points us to key questions of faith. What shall we do? What choices should we make each day? How do we spend our time and energy? How do we steward all God has given us? How do we manage the abundance of life in Christ?

The third line, that Sinatra quote, seems like a lark, a joke, a throwaway, until we consider the complexity of our lives and world. So we wonder: How do we put together our values and convictions with our ethics, actions, and daily choices? How do we live - doing and being and doing and being - together?

The scripture lesson from Mark's Gospel begins exactly this way: doing and being and doing and being and doing. Think about it. There is great emphasis on the actions of the disciples and the crowds. "The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all they had done and taught," "Many were coming and going; they had no leisure even to eat," "Many saw them and recognized them, and hurried from all the towns to greet Jesus."

It sounds busy, frantic, doesn't it? It sounds the way we sometimes might describe our lives, our world.

But at every turn, all this doing and doing and doing is interspersed with being. "Jesus said to his disciples, 'Come away to the wilderness by yourselves and rest.'" Then "they, the disciples and Jesus, went away in the boat to a deserted place, out in the wilderness, all by themselves."

If you look carefully at verses thirty to thirty-three, you will see that energetic action is followed by an invitation to be is followed by energetic action is followed by an invitation to be.

It's all mixed together, all jumbled and jammed up - do and be and do and be and do.

Through it all, how do we live for Jesus?

Douglas John Hall writes that the most basic ways of asking questions about human life are this: What do you believe? And how then do you behave? First, theology. Second, ethics. The first basic theological question, he thinks, is "How does God view the world?" The second basic ethical question, he thinks, is "How does God ask you and me to view the world?"

The tricky part is putting these two approaches together.

Oh, some parts of the Gospels don't seem too concerned about a harmony of being and doing, this synergy of theology and ethics. The Gospel of Luke introduces the preaching of John the Baptist with a radical focus on ethics: Turn around! Change your ways! Repent and bear new fruit! The crowds ask John, "What then shall we do?" His response: Share your food and clothing with the poor. Defraud no one; mistreat no one; extort no one." Doing is the only key in this story.

But the opening picture of Jesus in the Gospel of John takes a dramatically different approach: In the beginning was the Word, we read, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. What matters here is being, the great divine "I Am" of Jesus' identity.

Doing. And being. The challenge is putting them together.

In today's lesson by the lakeshore, Jesus is inviting his friends, his disciples to come away and rest, to come away and pray, to leave behind the busyness of the world and go on retreat together. At every turn, however, the world interrupts with its needs and demands and Important Things to Do.

We get it. We want to be people of achievement and accomplishment, "can do" people. But we also yearn to rest, to pray, truly to learn how to pray.

Ben Campbell Johnson, who taught spirituality and formation for many years at Columbia Seminary, once welcomed a friend who had come to town unexpectedly, "arriving on a day Johnson had set aside for time away on personal retreat. So he invited his friend to join him.

"What are we going to do all day?" he asked.

"Pray," Johnson responded.

"His friend blurted out, 'It doesn't take me that long to pray.'"

Sisters and brothers, that's how it is. There is so much to do! We are so busy from the demands of our days. We are so busy – and so undone from the brokenness of our world - that we don't make much time to pray, to be with God.

So how do we find Jesus? And how do we follow Jesus?

Anthony Bloom tells a story about a young Greek man from the fourth century named Maxim. "As a young man, Maxim went to church one day and heard the reading of the Bible which says we should pray unceasingly. It struck him. He thought he should do nothing else but fulfill this commandment. So he walked out of the church and into the neighboring mountains and set out to pray unceasingly. He knew the Lord's Prayer and some other prayers, and he recited them again and again.

"He felt good. He was praying; he was with God. Everything seemed to be going perfectly, except the sun began to go down and it became colder and darker. He began to hear all kinds of worrying sounds, crackling branches under the paws of wild beasts, flashing eyes, and the sounds of smaller animals being killed by larger animals.

"He felt all alone, a small, unprotected thing in a world of danger. He stopped saying the Lord's Prayer. He began to shout, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' He shouted like that all night. Then the morning came, and he thought he would go back to his praying.

"But by then he felt hungry. He thought he would collect some berries, and he started toward a bush. But then he realized that all those flashing eyes and savage paws must be hidden somewhere in the bushes. So he began to make his way very softly and at every step said, 'Lord Jesus Christ, save me, help me. O God, help me, protect me.' For every berry he collected he had certainly prayed several times.

"Many years passed, and Maxim became accustomed to all the noises and dangers of the day and night. But other temptations came upon him, temptations of the flesh and the mind and the emotions. So there was no moment he did not shout, 'Have mercy, have mercy, help, help, help.'"

"Maxim learned that unless God comes, he is hopeless and helpless. Only in the presence of divine mercy is there peace of heart and peace of mind.

"So Maxim learned to pray not in spite of the turmoil of life, but because of the turmoil, and because the turmoil was a real danger. He learned that temptation is lurking at every turn, trying to catch and destroy us. He learned that every human meeting is judgment, is crisis, is a situation in which we are called to receive Christ or to be Christ's messenger.

"When he realized the whole of life has this intensity and depth of meaning, turmoil became – and becomes for us - not a hindrance but the very condition of life which teaches us to pray."

Living drives us to prayer. Seeking God's presence through every moment leads us more deeply into the experience, the very being of human life.

That is what Jesus teaches us today in this story from Mark's Gospel. In Christ, our identity and our actions become one. Our trust in Christ leads us to give and forgive, to love and share, to pray and

pray and pray. And our prayers and forgiveness and care for others lead us right back home to our identity, our purpose, our being as God's children.

Jesus goes ashore and sees the great crowd, and he has compassion for them. He cares for them beyond words, beyond measure, because he knows that life in God, truly human life, is a life of compassion. And in that compassion, he begins to teach and to heal.

So it is for us who follow Jesus. When the disciples got out of the boat, their identity as disciples and their trust in the Savior led them to visit all the sick, to all those who needed Christ's healing touch. They gathered the sick, and brought them to Jesus for healing. They demonstrated compassion, because in Christ, they had seen God's compassion.

This is our yearning, for a life filled with both identity *and* purpose, in which we can rest in God's abundance *and* serve our neighbors, sent out to proclaim the Good News and help others in Christ's name.

We find Jesus as we rest in Christ and serve in his name and pray throughout our day. We find Jesus as we are and act and are and act. Life in Christ is the harmony of doing and being.

So through every day, you and I are surprised and delighted at every turn, finding Christ through the turmoil, finding grace for the journey, finding God's compassion as both a gift to receive and a gift to share. Let it be so, to the glory of God!