

How Do We Do What We Say We Believe?
Genesis 12:1-9
Luke 10:25-37

“Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”

How do we do what we say we believe? On the surface, the question invites each of us to examine our ethics, a word whose root meaning is stability or stall. Ethics, says Christian ethicist Paul Lehmann, “has to do with the stability and security which are necessary if one is going to act at all.” Morality might also have been a place to begin this morning except that morality, by definition, precludes the sort of engagement with our doing and deciding that I think your question begs. Morality is behavior according to custom, behavior dictated by a backward glance whereas ethics involves reflection on the foundations that inform our particular being and doing in the world today.

Now because the foundation of our particular being and doing in the world is our faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the implied modifier of “we” in your question is: How do we as Christians do what we say we believe? Or singularly, “*What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ and as a member of his church, to do?*” This, says Lehmann, is Christian ethics.

You would think the next move would be to open the Bible and begin reading, reading the New Testament in particular, to find out how to be Christian in the world. Surely in its stories, in the sayings of Jesus, in the pronouncements of Paul we will be met with the stability and security we need in order to act in the world. Yet what we find in these pages are the reflections of those who were struggling--just as we are struggling--to understand and interpret their responsibilities and behavior in the world in light of who they said Jesus was and who the risen Christ is.

To our question of how we do what we say we believe, you and I have been given a life

that death could not conquer nor the tomb imprison. A Person rather than principles, revelation rather than rules is the starting point for Christian ethics. To be sure, Christian ethics would be an entirely different enterprise were we following a dead hero, a man who had lived and taught and acted in such a way that a movement in history could be established for people who want to emulate him. It makes all the difference in the world that we seek to follow a living Lord! I cannot say this enough: only the living can surprise us. Therefore the answer to our question must be dynamic and open to the new thing God is doing.

How are we to do what we say we believe? "Follow me!" Jesus says to us still. But like the lawyer in Luke's Gospel, we need Jesus to be a bit more specific. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asks. Paul Lehmann hears in his question a more profound and poignant plea: "What shall I do to be who I am?" The question is a question of how to be human (not less/not more).

So Jesus asks what the law says. The lawyer replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." This is the how of being human! "You have given the right answer," says Jesus. "Do this and you will live." Love God with the whole of your life and love your neighbor as yourself and you will be the human being God created you to be.

This is not helpful we say to him and to the preacher for the morning. "What we need are simple, clear, practical answers." Who is my neighbor? Tell me specifically who I am supposed to love. We live in what Reinhold Niebuhr called the "nicely calculated less and more" where "human happiness is determined by the difference between a little more and a little less justice, a little more and a little less freedom, between varying degrees of imaginative insight with which the self enters life and understands the interests of the neighbor." But the story Jesus tells the

lawyer is about a love that knows no bounds. To our searching and absolutely serious question, Jesus responds always with the impossible. To our nicely calculated more or less, Jesus poses an absolute demand. To our minds full of rationalizations and reasonable explanations, Christ comes always as a question for which we have no good answer. To all of the possible possibilities by which we live, Jesus becomes the impossible possibility and bids us follow.

"Prophetic Christianity," says Niebuhr, "demands the impossible; and by that very demand, emphasizes the impotence and corruption of human nature...wresting from [our mouths] the cry of distress and contrition: "the good that I would, I do not; but the evil that I would not, that I do...Woe is me...who will deliver me from this body of death?"

So in the first place, as regards our doing what we say we believe, we find that before Christ is our hope, he is our despair. Not only in the words he says but in the person he is, we know ourselves to be so much less. Without him, we just might maintain the illusion, with a little effort, we can do what we say we believe. With him before us, grace alone is our only hope.

My friends, what these stories tell us again and again, is that it is precisely in the event of such sorrow you and I are first shaped for discipleship, for following **Him** and not our idea of the Christian life. The despair which comes over us as we face our own inability to be what we set out to be or do what we set out to do...the sadness which will not be comforted by encouraging words or sympathetic friends, when we know in the pit of our stomachs how completely we have let him down...the sorrow we know before the Christ we have tried to follow and cannot...these are the very conditions for our running after him as though our very lives depended upon him, wherein our following of him begins not with our good intentions, but with our need of his mercy and his grace and his love. Short of such sorrow, "the godly sorrow which worketh repentance," as Paul put it, we would not know to seek this Lamb of God who has come

to take away the distance between the world and the One who made it, between our selves and the God who loves us. Short of such sorrow, our discipleship would remain a program in the realm of human possibility rather than a person by whose side we were born anew to be.

All of which leads us to see, in the second place, that surely it is the Christ we cannot follow who alone reveals to us the incredible grace of God which, even now, keeps us from falling. The words Jesus spoke after the rich young man went away sorrowful, are the words he daily pronounces over every single one of our lives. "For mortals," says Jesus in words of audible grace, "it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." This God of mercy and of grace, revealed in Him who bid us follow, not only demands obedience of us, but also supplies that obedience to us. The point is not our following, but Christ's forgiveness; the end is not our goodness, but God's goodness toward us. Hence, literally, the command become a promise and the law does become grace and the requirement is nothing less than a gift.

"The main function of the impossible ethic," wrote D. M. Baillie, of this command of Jesus to follow when we both know we cannot, "is to drive us away from ourselves to God; and then there grows that peculiar kind of goodness which can never be achieved by mere moral endeavor, the Christian kind, which is unconscious of itself, and gives all the glory to God." When we have finally been made to face the depth of our own brokenness and the extent of our own limitations...when we have gone away sorrowful time and time again, unable to be the person we know we were born to be...then slowly we are given to see that even the right steps we thought we were taking were not our own doing, but God working in us...and so too the things we are called to be and do now and in the future, are not tests of our moral tenacity, but the tenderness of God made manifest in our very own history. Where before we saw our own virtue and religiosity, now we know God's persistence.

"By the grace of God, I am what I am," says Paul, "and God's grace which was bestowed upon me was not found in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." Or Augustine: "Even if mortals do good things which pertain to God's service, it is God...that brings it about that they do what [God] commanded." Or Anselm: "Whatsoever our heart rightly willeth, it is of thy gift." To live in the presence of the Christ we cannot follow, in the shadow of an impossible ethic, is to live with a growing and deepening gratitude toward the One who is constantly and carefully at work in us, drawing us, nevertheless, step by step, closer to Him.

What, asks Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is the content of discipleship?: "It gives us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after. It is not a cause which human calculations might deem worthy of our devotions....What happens? At the call, [the disciple] leaves all he has--but not because he thinks that he might be doing something worthwhile, but simply for the sake of the call....The old life is left behind [and] the disciple is dragged out of relative security into a life of absolute insecurity (that is, in truth, into the absolute security and safety of the fellowship of Jesus), from a life which is observable and calculable into a life where everything is unobservable and fortuitous, out of the realm of the finite, into the realm of infinite possibilities."

Where he will take you, where he will take me all the days before we lie to die, God only knows. But what we are given to know, in him, is that we were made for life with him. He bids us follow him because he wills to be with us, he does not will to be without us. Hence, more than our following him, does he carry us...more than our obeying his call, does he come to us...more than our being his disciples, does he find us lost and in need of such love as only he has

to give. Behold the Lamb of God, whom to follow is, finally and in every circumstance, grace upon grace.