

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA  
Proper 17, Year B, September 2, 2018  
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Hearing and Doing"  
James: 1:17-21; Mark 7:1-8, 14-5, 21-23

I wonder if you can identify these quotes:

"To be is to do"—Socrates (ancient Greek philosopher)

"To do is to be"—Jean-Paul Sartre (20th c French existentialist philosopher)

"Do be do be do"—Frank Sinatra (from his great philosophical song "Strangers in the Night")

this list apparently came about sometime in the 1960s, and ended up in print in a Kurt Vonnegut novel in the 1980s; now you may see it of a poster, or T-shirt, or coffee mug; it came to my mind because the juxtaposition of being vs doing is very similar to the juxtaposition we see in our Epistle and Gospel readings today: in the Epistle, that of hearing vs doing; in the Gospel, that of honoring God with our lips vs honoring God with our hearts; and we will see a similar juxtaposition next Sunday when our Epistle reading will contrast faith vs works

after a lot of prayer, Bible study, and experiences in ministry over the years, I've come to the conclusion that these supposed alternatives are really not alternatives at all; is it even possible to 'be' without 'doing'?; I don't think so; can one 'do' anything at all without 'being'?; I don't think so; I guess you could say I'm more of a 'Sinatrian' than either a Socratic or an Existentialist; I believe that "do be do be do...", or doing/being/doing/being, in an ongoing cycle, is actually the way we lead our lives; and likewise, I believe that hearing and doing the word are inseparable; honoring God with our lips and with our hearts are inseparable; having faith and doing works are also inseparable

looking more closely into James, one of the particulars that argues for the inseparability of doing and hearing is the way he says, "be doers of the word"; this isn't just any kind of generic doing; this isn't just staying busy; it is focusing our doing upon the kind of things that "the word" indicates to us

there are a wide range of possible meanings for 'word' here; Jesus is called the 'Word' of God at the beginning of John's Gospel; the holy scriptures are often referred to as the 'word' of God; the 'word' of God can be any communication that comes to people from God, either through prayer,

through dreams, through visions, or through prophetic messages; or it can be the Good News of Jesus as it is shared with people who don't yet know it; all of these uses are common throughout the Bible for 'word'

so to follow James' guidance about doing the word would mean that everything we set out to do is guided by an entire set of considerations: Jesus' example; Jesus' teachings; Jesus' presence with and within us through the Holy Spirit; the Bible as prayerfully studied and carefully interpreted; and by the living word that comes to us in response to prayerful interaction with God—which may not necessarily come to us in the form of audible words God has spoken to us directly; sometimes God's word does come to us in audible words, indirectly, spoken by faithful friends, or even sometimes by strangers; but most often God's word probably comes to us without words, in the sensing, feeling, and knowing what it is we are supposed to do; call that conscience, call it intuition, call it inspiration, or call it the result of Christian formation

all of this implies that we need to be active and attentive in listening, so that we can adequately hear the word of God in its many forms, and make sure our ways of doing and aims of doing are well-informed by God's inspirations; like the phrase "look before you leap" is important, so is: "listen before you act"; listen carefully and prayerfully for God's word to guide us in all we do

looking more closely into Mark's Gospel, we see that Jesus is himself paraphrasing from the prophet Isaiah (29:13) when he says, "this people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me"; so this distinction goes back a long way into the Hebrew culture; one way we tend to speak about this nowadays is with the phrases "talking the talk" and "walking the walk;" if all we do is talk the talk, no one knows for sure if we are sincere in carrying out what we're talking about; likewise, if all we do is walk the walk, people may have no idea why we have chosen to do the things we do; they may have no idea that we do what we do from our Christian conviction; it is the talking and the walking, together, that makes for a powerful honoring of God

the *Book of Common Prayer* has picked up this same thinking in the Baptismal Covenant ( p 305), where we remake this promise this every time we participate in a service of Baptism: "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?"; we all answer, "I will, with God's help;"

now, think of what it means to be a witness; if there has been a car accident, for example, a witness is someone who has seen what happened, and is willing to speak of what they saw; if someone didn't see what happened, they can't be a witness; if someone saw what happened, but drove away and didn't tell anyone what they saw, they are not fulfilling the role of a witness

our job, as Christians, is to be witnesses in all that we say and do—with all that we say corresponding with all that we do, and with all that we do corresponding with all that we say; it is with this kind of understanding and commitment that we be faithful people who do faithful things; it is with this kind of understanding and commitment that we hear God's word and do God's word; it is with this kind of understanding and commitment that we honor God with both with our lips and with our lives; it is with this kind of understanding and commitment that we proclaim by both word and example