

Luke 4: 1-14
Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
February 14, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In 1896 a novel by Charles Sheldon was published. It was titled In His Steps. With the exception of John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Sheldon's novel is the most read and influential Christian novel ever written. Worldwide it has sold over 30 million copies.

The story begins when a homeless person comes to the pastor's door asking for help and is turned away. The following Sunday the man relates his experience to the congregation. The pastor is deeply convicted and the next week preaches a sermon making a pledge to take no action without first asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" He invites the congregation to do the same. In response to the challenge a newspaper editor stops printing accounts of prize fights and stops printing a Sunday edition. A railroad executive resigns his position when he becomes aware of corruption in his company and takes the job of a telegraph clerk. A wealthy heiress uses her inheritance to transform a poverty stricken city neighborhood and help a settlement house put residents on their feet.

Ever since, "What would Jesus do?" has been a question that has been asked of every generation. A while back it was common to see WWJD bumper stickers, t-shirts and bracelets. The question continues to present a powerful challenge to believers. It is a constant reference point to the integrity of our mission and ministry. To what extent is our life together as a Christian community a response to the question, "What would Jesus do?"

This morning's passage from the gospel of Luke, however, raises an equally important question. It is, "What did Jesus *not* do?"

In the series of temptations Jesus receives from Satan it is what Jesus does *not do* which is most important.

- He *does not* turn stones into bread.
- He *does not* take the power of an earthly King.
- He *does not* engage in spectacular displays to prove his special relationship to God.

Instead, what *does* Jesus do?

- He draws on the resources of scripture.
- He chooses being faithful to God over being the great charismatic leader who will solve all the world's problems.
- In short, he says "no"

What might this mean for us?

Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen refers to the temptations as seductions. There is nothing morally wrong with these suggestions from the devil. Who would argue about feeding the hungry? Who condemn those who testify to amazing acts of God's intervention in protecting and healing human beings? What is the point of worldly power if not to use for the common good?

Yet it is the very reasonableness of these invitations which make them seductive and spiritually dangerous. Time and time again history tells us of people who started out with a vision prompted by a desire to make the world a better place. They attract a following and start out doing great good; but then something goes subtly wrong. Somehow the vision is replaced by loyalty to the leader, the community turns inward and soon there are stories of abuse and repression. In a famous and tragic case, the community inspired by the Rev. Jim Jones the vision comes to an apocalyptic end in mass suicides. When the leader of the vision becomes more important than the vision, there is grave danger. When the visionary accepts the seductive offer of the devil to use worldly power to achieve spiritual—or even political and economic goals

without the humility of being submitted to God first, there may be short term success; yet in the end whatever gains occur will be twisted and lost and people will suffer.

The temptation of the devil boils down to the age old belief that if my *goals* are good, whatever *means* I use to attain them is morally acceptable. It is the attitude of the great political theorist, Nicolo Machiavelli that, “the ends justify the means.” For those of you familiar with J.R.R. Tolkien’s series of stories about the hobbits who join a mission to destroy an infamous ring will recognize that the ring represents the temptation of power. Those who use it are twisted by it. Their great plans for good become the embodiment of evil.

This why it is what Jesus *does not do* which is so important. He says *no* to the seductive invitation to be powerful and charismatic. He says *no* to the seductive image of himself as the great King who establishes a wonderful new era of peace and prosperity; who, by will and force imposes order on an unruly world. He refuses to be the great messiah that the world longs for—even though he suspects that in the end the world will reject him and call for his death.

In the temptations, Jesus allows himself to be stripped naked of all pretense that humans can accomplish lasting good apart from the will of God. He allows himself to be burned with the purifying flame by utterly submitting his humanity to the true source of all good and lasting peace and community. It is only after this severe trial that Luke records in verse 14. “*Then, Jesus returned in the power of the Holy Spirit returned to Galilee.*”

Friends, I believe that we humans are so bogged down in all our my thoughts and opinions about our lives, the events of the world a, so filled with anger and frustration that the world is the way that it is and so hungry for someone to come along who will make it all better that we are absolutely incapable of recognizing what the will of God might be for this wonderful

yet terribly troubled world. That is why we so readily blindly to follow leaders who are so certain of the truth, be they religious or political.

How do we find an anchor, a perspective and a path which is reliable and which gives us ears to listen for truth in the midst of the blaring cacophony of angry and fearful voices? How can we become a community that is spiritually quiet enough that we can hear Jesus' voice saying, "Follow me" and trust that it really is *Jesus*?

I cannot think of a better way than to follow Jesus in *not doing*. By this I do not mean becoming passive, indifferent and withdrawn. I mean that we engage in the rigorous spiritual practice of seeking the will of God alone. We can do no better than to commit ourselves in all we say and do to love the Lord our God with are whole hearts, our whole minds and our whole strength, and to seek to love our neighbors with the same love with which God in Jesus loves us.

This calls us to a life of first waiting upon God. To be filled with God's Spirit *and then, and only then*, to be willing to be sent out. And if we seek to do this with our whole lives, believe me, *we will be sent out. Amen.*