

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

What Shall We Do?

From Sermon to Something More

Micah 6.6-8; James 1.22-25

Russ Dean, May 20, 2007



There may be no more annoying phrase in all the world. It's that kind of phrase that finds a parent's very last summertime nerve and does a little dance right on top of it! It's an age old refrain, but it's never been more ironic or more maddening than when it's quoted by one of our children, standing in the midst of game-filled family rooms, or toy-bulging playrooms, garages running over with bicycles and skateboards, next door neighbors within spitting distance, and swimming pools just down the street. You know what it is, don't you?

"I'm bored! What can I do!?"

Of course there are more joys to parenting than non-parents could ever imagine. But there are also more challenges than any sane person could dream up in your worst nightmare. I suppose just suggesting things for your kids to do ought not be that big a deal. There is, after all, a house full of options, but that question is just aggravating.

"What can I do?"

Of course there are also more joys to pastoring than any lay-person could ever imagine. But there are also more challenges than any sane person could dream up in your worst nightmare! (Do you see where I'm going!?) I suppose just suggesting things for your parishioners to do ought not be that big a deal. There is, after all, a world (and I mean an entire world) full of options, but that question is... well, yeah, it is just aggravating, if I may say so! After sermons we often hear comments such as: "That was

great, but ... I was really challenged by what you said, but... that was powerful, but... thank you for dealing with that subject, but... I've never thought about what you said in that way, but... you didn't tell me what to do!"

What shall we do?

I'm poking a little fun as I like to do, but I am trying to take your critique seriously.¹ Should good sermons end with a "to do list"? Is asking the questions, raising the issues, ruffling the feathers – alone – really an incomplete message?

William Sloane Coffin came to national notoriety with his boisterous preaching against what he saw as an immoral war in Vietnam. Coffin, whose words have never been easy for many to hear, apparently ran into the same critique in his preaching. Maybe it's a universal criticism: "It's easy for you to stand up there and list the problems... the hard part is figuring out what to do about it." I love the episode that we printed in today's bulletin – Coffin and Kissinger, toe to toe. The politician makes the probably-expected accusation, and the prophet fires back: "My job is to say... '*Let justice roll down like water...*' Your job is to get the plumbing in place."²

Just listing the problems may be "easy," Mr. Kissinger... but I don't think so. I believe racism and the "white privilege" threaten the prosperity and peace of this nation. And from the response of my recent sermon, many of you agree with.³ But if it's so easy

¹ The comment "you didn't tell us what to do," is not uncommon, though I have heard it several times this spring, as I have dealt with a number of "thorny issues" in my sermons. As a conclusion to this series of topic-related sermons, I chose to deal with this comment head-on.

² I had heard about a supposed exchange between Coffin and Henry Kissinger. I do not have a primary source to cite, but the episode was easily found by "googling" it: "There was an exchange like that between the great Protestant minister Williams Sloane Coffin and Henry Kissinger during the Vietnam War. Coffin was attacking the U.S. government policy about the war and Kissinger said to him something along the lines of, "If you're so smart, why don't you tell us what to do in Vietnam." And Coffin in his usual high-handed way said, "Mr. Secretary, my job is to say to you 'Let justice roll down like mighty waters.' Your job is to get the plumbing in place." <http://joseandmayra.com/?cat=1>

³ See my sermon, "Cleaning Out the Bucket in an Inconvenient Season."

just to say so... why haven't I preached it sooner? And, tell me when you last heard anyone else preach on the subject? Or when did you last hear a politician speak, asking white voters to consider how their living and their voting impact African Americans? I'm not claiming any moral high ground because I scratch the surface of issues occasionally – my “prophetic” words always seem too few and too far between (which further proves my point). Speaking “truth to power” – just speaking it – has never been easy. But stating the problem is the starting point.

In part today, then, I want to defend “to do-less” preaching. If you want easy answers, if you want to leave church each Sunday with a literal check list of to-dos, there are hundreds of houses of worship in this very city you may choose, whose pastors are happy to tell you exactly what God wants you to do on any given subject.

If you want to know why my preaching is often long on challenge and short on action, it is because the real prophetic word is not any easier to give than it is to receive. As for ultimate answers, I do not know what we ought to do in Iraq. I do not know what to do about the privilege I enjoy simply because of the color of my skin and my gender. I do not know what to do with 6 billion people on a planet that is already too small and too dirty.⁴ I do not know what to do to change the overriding mindset of a nation that is still convinced that peace comes through military might.⁵ But I cannot believe Jesus will be satisfied to “stay the course,” regarding our nation's direction on any of these issues.

Sermons give pastors an opportunity to speak the issues – and suggest some alternative ways we can think about them (if we choose to do so). It gives this pastor a chance to share with you some of my own decisions for action. What are we to do (as

⁴ See my sermon, “An Economy of Widest Worth.”

⁵ See my sermon, “‘Dear Ian...,’ A Father's Prayer.”

individuals and as a nation) with a Jesus we claim to follow – who died rather than defend? I do believe in our imperfect world we need a military. (If you were listening last week, you heard me say this.) But I have decided, because of my understanding of Jesus, I will not participate in our military – as currently constituted. It is my earnest prayer that the service I offer to this country will be esteemed and understood as just as important, and just necessary to our peace, as that offered by those who will bear arms in our defense.

That is my decision. That is what I will do. But I cannot decide what you should do. And I will not pretend to do so. As one commentator suggests, there are no accidents in the human heart, however. Each person makes intentional decisions about how to live, and for what she/he is willing to die.⁶ Words are often our starting point. Words in sermons. Words in speeches. Words in guidance from trusted others. Words that ignite our passions, persuade our hearts, change our minds. I do believe in words.

But words, alone, are not enough. *Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.* (James should have included, “and not speakers only,” also!) Though I just told you, again, that I don’t know how to solve the problems of the world, I do believe that sewn into our own hearts is a basic understanding of what we ought to do. After every sermon. I believe the human heart is programmed with a rather simple code, which is founded on simple actions: *Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly.*

Do you really need me to tell you how to change the world in regards to racism and white privilege? *Do justice.* When the black family moves-in down the street, refuse

⁶ This is one of those “snippets” that has come to me through another church bulletin or some miscellaneous quote. I do not know the actual source, but as I received it, it is from a David Gusterson: “Ishmael gave himself to the writing of it and as he did so he understood this, too: that accident ruled every corner of the universe except the chambers of the human heart.”

to join the conversation springing up all over the neighborhood. (“What’s going to happen to our property values?”) *Love mercy*. Go introduce yourself, intentionally, so you can spread a good word about the new family down the street, to all those who are whispering. *Walk humbly*. Even if you lose a few dollars on your house, a neighborhood of true neighbors is of much more value, anyway.

It’s not that white America does not know how to end white privilege. It’s just that we don’t want to.

Interestingly, the barrage of “What do we dos?” seem directly proportional to the amount of discomfort there is in a particular topic. This is so because of the ability of the prophetic word to hold up a mirror to the hypocrisy and apathy which lies within our own hearts. (I can say this with a clear conscience because I can assure you that after studying and preparing for a sermon, this happens much more to the preacher than to any listener!) The old preacher said, “If I’m not stepping on your toes, your feet shouldn’t be hurting.”

Amy and I take pride in what we call a 50-50 marriage. There is no “women’s work” in the Dean house, even though we have divided the “supervisory” responsibilities for basic chores in an old-school fashion. (I’m responsible for making sure the yard and the cars and the bills are taken care of; Amy is responsible for the inside of the house – though not responsible to do every detail of the work.) Often, when I’ve not done enough to help around the house, my excuse is that Amy hasn’t told me what to do. (You know, men, “I’ll be glad to do it, if you’ll just tell me what to do...”) But, do I really need to be told that that thick gray film on the mantle isn’t Martha Stewart’s newest decorating powder!? *Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly...* and dust the mantle while you’re at it!

I don't know what you need to do to clean up your house. Amy and I have heard you critique, and we will make an effort in the future, to be more concrete, to offer suggestions for action, not just the "easy," preacherly words! But I firmly believe that when you are willing to give careful, prayerful thought to an issue raised in a sermon, you will find a starting place for your action – and one that is more appropriate to your gifts, your sensibilities, your personal context than any suggestion we could make from here. We keep telling you that preaching is a two-way street. No sermon is complete until you choose to respond to it.

It is necessary that we move from sermon to something else. Whatever that something else is for you will begin simply: in justice, in love, in the humility of a life lived intentionally, if not effectively.

For this week, then, here's your assignment: do something that takes you out of your comfort zone. Do something. A phone call. A visit. A word to someone who needs it that in your own way expresses your faith in hope, your hope in forgiveness. Do something, and look for God in it. I promise you if you will make this start, it will be the best ending I could give to this sermon! Do something!

May it be so!

Pastoral Prayer

"O use me, God, use even me just as you will, and when, and where...
Until your blessed face I see, your rest, your joy, your glory share."⁷

⁷ These lines are from the hymn, "O, Speak, to Me That I May Speak," which we sang during the confession time in this worship service.