

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Proper 27, Year A, November 12, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Doing and Being”
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Matthew 25:1-13

I wonder if you can name the authors of these three quotes:
first: “To be is to do”—Socrates (ancient Greek philosopher)
next: “To do is to be”—Jean-Paul Sartre (20th c French existentialist philosopher)
last: “Do be do be do”—Frank Sinatra (from his great philosophical song “Strangers in the Night”); you may have seen these on a T-shirt, or coffee mug; I was led to think of it because of the juxtaposition of doing and being that can be seen in our Old Testament and Gospel readings today; Joshua warns the Hebrew people about the importance of serving the Lord—of what they have to do as people of faith; while Jesus’ parable about the unprepared bridesmaids instructs his disciples on the importance of keeping “awake”—of how they have to be as people of faith

let’s clarify these words a bit; ‘doing’ is accomplishing things, meeting goals, and solving problems; ‘being’ is more about one’s mental and spiritual state; it is about slowing down and stepping back from doing out of a desire to be more aware of ourselves, of the people around us, and of our surroundings; taking time to be gives us an opportunity to reflect upon all that we have been doing, learn from it, and adjust what or how we might choose to do things differently next time

over the years, I’ve come to the conclusion that these supposed alternatives of doing and being are really not alternatives at all; is it possible to ‘be’ without ‘doing’?; I don’t think so; can one ‘do’ without ‘being’?; I don’t think so; I guess you could say I’m a ‘Sinatrian’—I believe that “do be do be do...”, is needed, in an ongoing cycle, as the way to lead our lives; that these things are inseparable: serving God in both what we do, and in being attentive, alert, and mindful, even when we are not in the act of doing anything; they are like the two sides of a coin—two sides of the coin of faithful living
it is important to recognize that there is such a big emphasis on doing over being in our society; it is by doing things that we earn our livelihood; our culture often sees taking time out for being as wasteful: it doesn’t earn money

or accomplish anything; but if we are always doing, doing, doing, without taking some time out once in awhile for just being, we may very well lose sight of why we are doing what we do, or not be aware of the consequences of all that we are so busy doing

looking more closely into Joshua, there is a lot about doing, in its call to serve the Lord and to obey the statutes and ordinances that Joshua is passing on to the people; but there is also the admonition to “incline your hearts to the Lord;” this is the kind of thing that comes not so much from doing as it comes from quiet, from prayer, from meditation, and from reflection; to incline our hearts toward God is to put us in a state of proper preparedness so that we are ready to do our service to God in the right ways, using the right means, and in the right frame of mind and of heart

looking more closely into Matthew’s Gospel we see the same thing; the wise bridesmaids had done something, carried their oil with them, that enabled them to participate in the wedding banquet when the time came for it; that was necessary preparation; but the larger advice about keeping awake is a reminder that there are many things that life will bring our way that we can’t always know in advance, so we can’t always do anything in particular to prepare for it; sometimes all we can do is prepare ourselves, spiritually, for whatever might come our way

that’s where our taking the time to be, apart from always doing, on a regular basis, is important for us as people of faith; remember how Jesus often slipped away from the disciples and from the crowds, away from all his doing of teaching and healing, in order to reconnect with God his father in prayer; his example shows us that time apart, time being by ourselves, time being in prayer, time being with God renews our energy and strengthens our purpose

and notice that prayer itself can be focused on either doing or being; prayers that are asking God for specific results are doing prayers; these need to be balanced with prayer time that is more being prayer: listening to God, listening to our own thoughts and emotions, and processing all that God has sent our way

I picture the relationship of doing to being in this way: as a cycle, a circle in continuous rotation; one side of the circle is our doing; the other side of it is our being; it doesn’t matter where you happen to be on that circle at any

given time, but the motion around it is going to carry you from one part to the other; what we do informs and shapes who we are; who we are informs and shapes what we do; and on and on in continuous progression; look at your life and see if you have a good balance of doing and of being; serve the Lord, yes; incline your heart to the Lord, yes; keep awake to what the Lord is up to, yes; do the work of a faithful person in your doing and be a faithful person in your being