

January 27, 2019
Acts 2:43-47
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“Becoming”

Good morning. Today is the third and final sermon in the series of Being, Doing, Becoming. I knew when I chose the three words to illustrate these three concepts that they weren't original to me. Some of you may have read or at least be familiar with the 2018 memoir *Becoming* by former First Lady Michelle Obama; I have not read that memoir so any resemblance this sermon may have to that memoir is purely coincidental.

It seems to me that becoming is the natural result of being and doing. Here's a little review of the past two weeks: [Slide 1] Being and Doing, and the relationship between them has been the subject of philosophical discussion for centuries: which comes first, being or doing? Which is more important? How do they effect each other? Or, in the case of that Sinatra guy, what melody do they fit the best? I believe that the witness of the gospels is that our identity -- we are God's beloved and redeemed by Jesus Christ -- determines our purpose. That is, who we are points us in the direction of what we do -- or at least, what we are called to do.

[Slide 2] Every person is seeking a life beyond meaningless work: a life beyond the necessities of survival. There are healthy and not-so-healthy ways to do this, of course. We have strong voices in our culture which tell us that a meaningful life is full -- full of activities and experiences, full of stuff that we accumulate and hang on to. Paradoxically, lives which are full to the top can leave us feeling empty: lives which are full of addiction or full of toxic relationships or full of chaos (or all three), can leave us feeling like our lives are empty, or that our efforts are meaningless. Last week we pondered Jesus' words in Matthew 25, when he told the gathered crowd that In As Much, or *in the way that* they fed the hungry, clothed the naked,

cared for the sick and visited those in prison, In As Much as they did it to the least of these, they did it to Jesus. I think it is significant that Jesus identified himself so directly with the hungry and poor, the least of these. Doing ministry to others should not be away of advancing ourselves or getting personal recognition. Ministry to the least of these acknowledges that we find meaning in our lives when we do things -- maybe not everything, but some things -- which are not about us. It is the parts of ourselves which we give away -- not our money, but maybe our ego and our need to be important -- which allow God's love to fill us.

We began with Jesus' baptism in week 1, moved to Jesus' teaching and ministry in week 2, and today we are in the book of Acts, after Jesus has been resurrected and ascended to heaven. This is Acts chapter 2: the first part of this chapter is the account of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples in Jerusalem, giving them the power to speak so that people from all over the Middle Eastern world could understand them. Many heard and believed, and about three thousand were baptized and added to that original group of believers. It was an amazing event and a turning point in the life of the disciples and in the history of the church. It would be great if the biblical story ended with that powerful conversion. It doesn't.

No matter how miraculous, sincere, dramatic or ordinary our conversion story is, unless it happens on our deathbed, it is not the end of the story. We don't stop being and doing when we become Christians and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We may stop doing things we did before we were Christians, but that doesn't mean that were done. Part of being and doing is the way that those things interact with each other and how they shape us through our lives. A footnote here: Tim and I watched the documentary "Three Identical Strangers" this past week. It's airing tonight at 9:00pm on CNN. It's the story of identical triplets which were separated when they were six months old and adopted by families who had no knowledge that the other triplets existed. Who we are may be encoded in our genetics, but who we become is much more complicated than that. It depends on what we do, and the people around us.

Here's what Acts 2 says, "all who believed had all things in common . . . spent much time together in the temple, [and] broke bread at homes and ate their bread with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." It is not the specifics of those activities which I want to highlight this morning: holding all property in common is rare, even in the Christian community: monasteries and convents and a few experiments in communal living are the only examples I know. Holding all ideas and opinions in common has rarely been tried and never been achieved in any community that I know of -- Christian or otherwise. I don't want to get too hung up on the property part of this and lose the rest of what I believe this text is telling us about becoming. What I love about this text is the part that I left out when I summarized it for you just now. It's a phrase that appears twice in this short passage, in verse 46 and verse 47. It's the phrase Day by Day. Those of you who know the 1971 folk rock musical "Godspell" by Steven Schwartz know the musical setting we sang this morning. There a much older hymn titled Day by Day -- I don't know if Diane Lund knows it, but Tim might because it was written by a Swedish Lutheran woman named Lina Sandell -- later Lina Sandell-Berg. She also wrote the hymn Children of the Heavenly Father. Lina grew up close to her father, who was a Lutheran pastor. When she was 16, they were rowing across a lake together, and he fell out of the boat and she watched him drown. She wrote the text to Day by Day in 1865. The more literal Swedish translation is Just one day or Just another day: it's a prayer for God's strength and comfort.

Praying for strength, comfort, guidance are things we need to do daily, sometimes maybe hourly, because becoming -- whether it's becoming an adult or becoming a Christian or becoming a parent or becoming a pastor -- is not an event, it's a process. Maybe you had a lightning bolt conversion experience similar to those three thousand folks who converted at Pentecost in Jerusalem: praise God! Maybe you were raised in a Christian family with Christian values, and you gradually came to the realization of your place in God's family: praise God! We use rituals like baptism to mark the beginning of a life committed to Christ. Wherever you start and whatever happened before then, living a life committed to Christ is a process. Like any process of growth and change, Christian formation happens gradually, day by day. I know that dramatic and sometimes tragic life

events happen which change the source of our lives, but even then, it's how we function day by day, the accumulation of small things -- sharing what we have, eating together, worshipping together, giving thanks -- those small things, repeated over and over make us who we become. One worship service may not change your life, but if you worship over a life time that will shape you.

Something else I want to point out about this passage which may not be immediately obvious: not only were the activities of those first converts routine, everyday things--distributing what they had to those in need, going to the temple together, breaking bread, praising God -- they were all done in the company of other believers. I think there's something to be said for other Christians -- sometimes we don't say nice things about other Christians -- but I don't think we can discount the effect that other people have on who we become. Whether they are people we admire and want to be like, or people we disdain and don't want to be like at all, other people shape who we are. The people whom we see and interact with every day influence who we become. At best, they challenge us to be more aware of who we are and how our actions affect them and others. Becoming aware of God and becoming aware of our relationships with others are both part of the process of what we are called to do day by day.

[Slide 3] It was a 13th century bishop, Richard of Chichester who wrote the earliest known version of this prayer. I'm glad Steven Schwartz borrowed it for his musical, because I can remember anything better if it's set to music. It's a simple set of phrases, neatly rhymed, but there's a lot here that I think is relevant to our being, doing, and becoming and how that process happens day by day. We are probably not going to reach Christian enlightenment in one single, amazing, heaven-shattering moment, but if we can increase our awareness just a little bit -- see God more clearly today than we did yesterday -- that is a worthy and ambitious goal for becoming a Christian. If we can love Christ a bit more and follow him a little more closely than we did yesterday or last week or a year ago, we are on the path of Christian formation; we are in the process of becoming the people and the community of people whom God has called us to be.

May God give us the grace to see more clearly, love more dearly and follow more nearly today and in the days to come. Amen.