
Why Didn't Jesus Do Something?

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Palm Sunday – Year B

Lightly edited transcript:

Why didn't Jesus do something? Why didn't he try to defend himself? Why did he just stand there, silent? I mean, he could have tried to stir up the crowds. That's what the scribes and Pharisees did. They rallied the crowd around Barabbas. Jesus knew how to do that, presumably. He could have defended himself by attacking them. An ad hominem attack, pointing out all the evil that they had done. He had certainly proven himself to be an effective debater. Think about the time at the temple, or when talking about the worship due Caesar or the Sabbath or the healings. Jesus could have attacked the scribes and the Pharisees. And what about Pilate? Why didn't Jesus simply convert Pilate? He had dealt with other Gentiles before, healing demoniacs the Syrophenician Woman. You remember the centurion, even the criminal who is hanging next to him at the end. Often Jesus's presence was just enough. Why didn't he assert that authority? Why didn't Jesus do something?

I think Paul actually answers this question in his letter to the Philippians. When talking about the mind of Christ, Paul describes Christ as emptying himself, as humbling himself. In the form of God, Paul says, "Jesus, nevertheless, didn't feel himself equal to God, but humbled himself becoming human." This is the key. This self emptying, Paul called it kenosis. It is the love that comes from giving yourself away. And if we go back and look at Jesus's ministry, we will see that this is what he did, time and time again. He gave himself away. He emptied himself for others.

Now Gerald May, a spiritual writer that I admire, who was instrumental in starting the Shalem Institute in Washington DC, draws a comparison between willfulness and willingness. Willfulness is the state we find most natural. It's that calling to assert ourselves, to grab for power, to master things, to be the author of our own destiny. That's willfulness. May however, calls us to a willingness, to a emptying of ourselves, to a self surrender in which we trust the process that God has created. Find ourselves in the living ecosystems of this world in order to participate more fully in them. Willfulness and willingness. You might say that Jesus is self emptying his willingness.

Now, these concepts are rarely one or the other. Think of the icon of our own history. The flag, don't tread on me. You know, I presume, that that flag was raised by John Paul Jones back at the time of the revolution. And it stands for fighting back against oppression. It stands for a willingness that recognizes the brotherhood of all in fighting oppression. And yet, over our history, we have realized that it also stands for willfulness, for the willfulness that led to the treatment of the peoples already in this country, the Native Americans or the treatment of the land or the treatment of African-Americans who were enslaved.

There is willingness in that flag, a sense of commitment and patriotism and brotherhood and the will to stand against oppression for each other. And there is willfulness in that flag too, I have my rights and I won't give them up for anybody else or any other reason. Willfulness and willingness. If we are to follow in Christ's self emptying, if we are to practice the kenosis that Paul describes as being the mind of Christ, then how is it we are to live our lives?

I don't think the answer is in doctrine or in ethics or mission or outreach or service. I think it starts in our inner lives. It starts with an attitude or disposition of self giving love. This can be harder than you think, because it feels like it's passive or weak or risky. And it is at times risky, but it actually calls upon us to have great strength, to have a great sense of our connection with God in order to participate in the process, in order to

give life to others. We will often find ourselves exercising a lot of effort to create space so that others may live, to have a broader vision that encompasses all of us, to feel connected to the whole. Those are all characteristics of willingness.

And yet it can sometimes feel like we are bearing a cross, not a cross in the sense of life's little burdens. I have this troubling thing, that's my cross to bear. That's not what that term really means. That term really means to be willing, to participate and suffer the consequences, to not know what opening ourselves to the mystery of life will actually bring, and do it anyway. To not be sure that extending ourselves for another will be to our advantage and to do it anyway. This is what it means to be willing, but it's harder than you think because it's not our natural move.

So just to illustrate this point, I want you to try something. Just sit quietly and pay attention to your breath. Feel your breath coming into your body, the expansion of your abdomen, and feel the breath going out of your body, the contraction of your abdomen. And just do this several times. What did you experience? For many of us, the minute you pay attention to your breath, you instinctively try to control it. You try to make sure it's going deeper because you know that's what's supposed to happen. You try to make it more rhythmic because that feels like the right answer to the test.

But try it again. And this time, try not to control your breath. Let your breath come in and out of your body. Observe it, but don't control it. If it's shallow, it's shallow. If it's arrhythmic, it's arrhythmic. If it is deep, it is deep.

You might try this little exercise as we head into Holy Week, as a reminder of the distinction between willfulness and willingness, our natural instincts to control, to be the master of our destiny, and our calling and faith to participate in the life of God, where we give up control, where we surrender to God, where we say yes to life and trust that that is the real way to be alive. Not only for us, but for others.

Why didn't Jesus do something? Why didn't he defend himself or stir up the crowd or convert Pilate? I think Paul's got it right. I think the mind of Christ is one of self emptying love, even to the point of death on the cross. But Jesus's willingness to give of himself, shines out as an example for us of the way to God, the way that we too, by being willing, may become one with God, may follow the path that he has trod. It doesn't have to be a big thing right away. It can be a small step that you take.

So as you go through Holy Week, and all of the liturgical observances that we will offer, I invite you to try that little breath practice. Pay attention to your breath, but try not to control it. Realize that that breath, the Holy Spirit, if you will, the Ruah of God is a gift to you, as is your life. And to fully accept that gift is to empty yourself of all of the efforts of control and mastery, and being open to the world that God has created, being open to the relationships that present themselves before you. It's a small thing, this breath practice, but it could get you started on a road that leads straight to heaven, knowing that you may bear your own cross as you walk that path.

Amen.