

WHAT DO YOU DO?

August 28, 2011, First Unitarian of St Louis

©2011 Rev. Thomas Marston Perchlik

STORY

In the beginning, when the first people walked the earth, there were two brothers, Cain and Able. Cain was a fantastic gardener. His father had also been a good farmer and gardener, but Cain was great at it, he loved watching good things to eat, tomatoes and peppers and barley rising from the earth and his labor.

Able, on the other hand, was a keeper of animals. He was especially good with sheep, providing good wool for clothes and covers and cloth for all uses. What was more the sheep and lambs could be killed to provide delicious meat for stews and roasts. Both were proud of their work, both felt what they did was valuable.

In these days people would take some of their wealth and sacrifice it. They knew that God had created everything and they wanted to show appreciation and a realization that without God they would have nothing. So, they would make an altar to hold a fire, and then take a part of all they had and put it in the fire as a gift to God.

Cain brought sheaves of his grain, the best tomatoes, the biggest squash, all to be burned. Able killed the choicest of his lambs and burned the most delicious and valuable of the meat. When this happened Cain became depressed. I am not sure why. The writer who gave me this story did not tell why. But I think it was all because of Coyote. He was there in the beginning, one of the First People, and he twisted everything to make creation richer and more complicated. I imagine that he sat down next to Cain as Able performed his sacrifice and recited his prayers. Coyote nudged Cain and said "Wow, smell that delicious meat. It makes my mouth water just to think of it... much better than burnt bread!" He went on like this, making Cain feel that his sacrifice was less than that of his brother.

He became downcast and sad, which is what happens when anger is turned inward and repressed. God was there, for God is everywhere, in Cain's heart and mind. God said, "Why should you be angry? If you do good you will be acceptable. But beware. If you do anything that is wrong, then evil is waiting at your door. It wants to control you, but you must control it."

Cain heard that he should turn from anger and jealousy but he still felt them, strong as ever. One day he saw that Able's sheep had trampled some of his fields. He went to get Able to show him the damage, but when they got to the field they were both angry. Cain said, "I hate you" to his brother. Able said, "You are so mean, I hate you". Cain was furious and he picked up a rock and threw it. Able had turned his head at just the wrong minute and the rock hit him hard. He did not even make a sound, just fell. When Cain rushed over, saddened by what he had done, he found Able was dead and bleeding on the ground. Cain ran away terrified.

God came to him and asked, "Where is your brother?" Cain barked back, "How should I know, I am not my brother's keeper, am I?" God did not answer but asked "What have you done?" Cain was sullen and silent. Then God said, "Because you killed

your brother the earth will turn against you. No longer will it give you any crops and you will be a wanderer on the earth". Cain cried out, "This is a terrible punishment; surely people will find me and kill me". But God replied, not so. I do not want you to die, but to live. I will mark you so that all will know that if any harm you they will be harmed seven times worse". So it was that Cain went on to have a life, to try and atone for what he had done to Able. He was punished, but not killed. He went on to be married, have children, and even build a city. But first he began walking the restless earth; and Coyote walked with him.

SERMON

In the song we just heard, "My Father", the singer tells what her father said he would do, "that we would live in France". By contrasting that with the reality of his life in the mines she paints his promises as mere dreams. What he did was work in the mines, and love his family, and dream. Yet, in the end his dreams had become true. His work and his dreaming both shaped his daughter's life, and she moved to France. So in this context I ask, "What do you do?" The philosopher Socrates said, "To be is to do", that what we are flows from our being. The existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre reversed the relation of essence and existence saying that "To do is to be". Then modern philosophy became rather tangled when Sammy Davis sang, "Do Be Do Be Do", followed by the dog Scooby Do saying, "Scooby Dooby Do". No matter your philosophy, the question remains; "What do you do?"

When you first meet someone, the most common question to ask, after "What is your name?" and "Where are you from?" is "What do you do?" Perhaps, at a social gathering after hearing several people talk about their paid work, one person turns to you and asks, "What do you do?" How do you answer? If you know that your life's work does not generate a paycheck or that you can't be fired, how do you answer? If you are anxious about being compared to others, if you are uncertain about how to describe your work, then you might simply look blankly at them, as if you had forgotten what you did all day. Fear of judgment hovers over that question, as if someone is asking, like God in the story, "What have you done?"

Of course what you do is far more than your paid work. I have long believed that the most difficult job is looking for a job. It is hard work, full of rejection, long hours and no pay. Those who work without direct pay, like home-makers, often feel underappreciated or misunderstood. Being a parent is a career that demands much time, thought, and emotional resilience and to which you can give much of your heart and life. To work another job on top of being a parent is to be doubly employed.

We resist being limited by our jobs alone. I was at an office the other day and I saw a calendar that had these words in big bold type "Always give 100% at work. To the side of this was a chart reading: Monday 12%, Tuesday 23%, Wednesday 40%, Thursday 20% and Friday 5%. The next month had a picture of two women working at their desks; one was on the phone saying to someone "Our computers are down so we have to do everything manually." Both women had decks of cards and were playing solitaire the old fashioned way. We should judge what people do, the quality of their work and its value is worthy of judgment. But we cannot justly judge people by their work. You cannot judge a person by what they do.

In part this is because nothing you do will ever be enough, nothing can ever make you perfect. Thus the requirement of a good life is not to be perfect, just to do something worth doing; to do justice and walk humbly on the good earth to paraphrase the prophet Micah. The point is that we can judge action but not people. I have heard some Christian leaders say, "We love gay people, but we hate what they do." The statement makes me wonder, what is it they do we should hate? Shopping, going to work, or watching a Cardinal's game? Maybe it is enjoying a good book, walking the dog, or making a home? In the end this "love the sinner" school of thought undermines its own prescription because it actually reinforces judgment of people. Sadly, condemning homosexuality is not showing love to homosexuals. To love someone is to accept them and know them well enough no matter what they do. To love is to do mercy and give kindness and show care. It is in doing that our love lives, not in vague feelings of kindness, but in compassionate action.

Also, we cannot justly reduce a person to one thing they do, one aspect of their lives. A person who steals is not merely a thief, and not even murder defines a person. We all do so much: dreaming, dancing, playing, singing, or laughing. All are forms of doing that can sooth the soul and give heart to living. Beyond that, what do you do when a relationship falls apart, or a dream is blocked, or hope dies? Do you dry up like a raisin in the sun, or do you explode? In difficult times and times of ease, what do you do to nurture your inner peace, and your connection to the web of being? How do you feed your hunger for justice, righteousness and beauty?

This is the key question: how to judge a person's action and yet affirm their inherent worth and dignity, and potential for growth. Some reduce religious action to rules of behavior and forget the deeper dimensions of being. The joke on Calvinist work ethic is "Jesus is coming, look busy." In contrast, an anonymous Zen poet evoked the deepest form of doing in this way: "Even when I sit, the sun keeps shining, the grass continues to grow". Perhaps what you should do is stop being busy and to focus on what is natural and good. Relax into your original blessing and express your natural goodness in your doing, like the lilies of the field that do not toil or spin.

If people are unfairly judged by their actions, an opposite question troubles religion. Religion in America is most often reduced to mere doctrine or belief. Usually, when people first hear about the UU church they will ask, "What do you believe?" Often UUs accept this trap, thinking that freedom of belief, toleration of differing beliefs, and the use of reason and science in formulating religious belief are all that matters. We are so proud of our non-creedal stance. What I say today is that belief matters, but it is not the essential thing. I have note that, C.P. Tiele writing for the Encyclopedia Britannica on "Religion," stated, "There is no living religion without something like a doctrine. On the other hand, a doctrine, however elaborate, does not constitute a religion." Beyond belief there is practice. I think the more important question in religion is not about belief but "What do you do?"

Hindus call this Karma Yoga, working out your purpose and destiny. The duty of Jews is not to believe, but to uphold their end of the Covenant with God; to perform mitzvot, or commandments. Buddhism includes right belief or understanding and intention, as only two of the eight spokes of the Dharma wheel, the rest are about right

action. Muslims say their faith includes certain beliefs, like the Day of Judgment and the existence of angels and jinn, but Islam is upheld by five pillars of duty. Neo-pagans often say, "These eight words the law does fulfill, as you harm none do what you will." Religion is judged by what you do. I agree with Thomas Jefferson, who, in a letter to Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith August 6 1816, wrote:

"I never told my own religion, nor scrutinized that of another. I never attempted to make a convert, nor wished to change another's creed. [Instead] I have ever judged of the religion of others by their lives, and by this test, my dear Madam, I have been satisfied yours must be an excellent one, to have produced a life of such exemplary virtue and correctness. For it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read."

What you do expresses your values, your deepest commitments. For instance, I know of two women. One was a UU and active in the pro-choice movement, newly married and pregnant with her first child. The other was a devoted Catholic with five children, who's husband died in a car accident just before she discovered she was pregnant. This woman had suffered hard during her previous pregnancies. The fifth had almost killed her, kept her in bed for months before and after the delivery. She prayed, she went to mass, she asked God what she should do: risk her own life, or end the pregnancy. The UU woman was diagnosed with cancer, she also prayed, went to worship, asked others what she should do: put my life at risk or take chemotherapy and thus end this pregnancy. The Catholic had an abortion and told me she never felt any guilt, knowing that her children were first in her life. The UU woman believed in choice and thus made a powerful one. She decided to forgo cancer treatment until her child was born, recording messages and preparing for her own death, knowing that she had put her child first in her life. She was able to be mother to her daughter for a year or so before the cancer ended her life. What matters is not your success, or what you should have done or what you wanted to do. What matters is what you did.

Even more than that, what do we do together? We have often been active in the community, creators of institutions and transformers of society. I am always proud of how many of us work in civic organizations and political movements. By these things others can judge our faith. My colleague Rev. Kim Crawford-Harvie said that our core UU spiritual practice is working for justice; social, economic, and environmental justice. Of course good conversation, meditation or prayer, and thoughtful study are also key disciplines of our religion. All nurture our spirit and are part of living within the context of a UU community. All help us form the Beloved Community. Professional ministry is merely an institutionalization of what each of us may do in the congregation and in the world. UUs are not just those in worship on Sundays or whose names are in the membership book. UUs are those who do their ministry, their work as UUs, in church, or in homes, in hospital rooms or in board-rooms, they are up on roofs, and in soup kitchens. What we do is work to make the world a better place, we are those who under the banner of UU, one part of the great community of all souls, those who are doing what creates joy in the heart, awakens truth in the mind, and brings peace to the soul. So I ask you, in your religious life, What do you do?

Closing Hymn - #140 "Hail the Glorious Golden City; Benediction - James 1:22-25