

***“Called to Be Obedient”***

In his notable hymn of praise to Christ in the letter to the Philippians, St. Paul writes that Christ,

***“ . . . emptied Himself  
and took on the form of a man;  
and being found in human likeness  
He humbled Himself  
and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”***

The theme of obedience is a critical theme for the Biblical witness. The whole problem of sin stems from Adam and Eve’s disobedience. Yes, we can quibble about whether or not sin had already entered when the thought to eat the forbidden fruit was formed; but clearly, the act of disobedience — *taking* and *eating* the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil — is the “proof” of their disobedience.

God had given broad freedom to Adam and Eve: ***“You may freely eat of the trees in the garden”*** [Genesis 2:6]. This was not a rigidly monitored environment. They were not victims of some control-freak who had tied their hands so that just about anything they did was wrong. Some of you have worked for companies whose rules, or an employer whose demeanor, suggested just that — and it is highly unnerving to be supervised by someone who sees his or her job primarily as catching you at some infraction (I have never understood the managerial attitude that glorifies “writing someone up” as the highest supervisory virtue). This becomes even more unnerving when infractions are supremely petty, or worse, indeterminate — just sort of depends of how Mr. Big feels that day. The real issue, it turns out, is that “Mr. Big” ain’t “Mr. Big” at all, but he sure does have a need to feel like he is (and she’s do a pretty good job of this, as well).

But such was not Eden — Eden was just that . . . the kind of place you keep telling yourself you would love to work. One rule! That was it! One

rule and one rule only! And not an all-pervasive rule like “*Mr. Big is never wrong.*” The one rule in the Garden of Eden was: “. . . *of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*” [Genesis 2:16-17] Pretty straightforward; not too complicated. The rule was laid out in clear language. . . consequences for infractions were duly noted. As Bill Cosby pointed out, like with any kid, if you say, “*Don’t touch!*” the immediate reaction is, “*Where is it?*” We now know that this is human nature (we cannot say that it was the inherent nature of Adam and Eve as created, but we certainly attest that it is the human condition in the brokenness of the Fall): We are fascinated by the prohibited.

Whatever we are told we should leave alone, we want to know why. Some of that is the “*Couldn’t happen to me*” school of thinking; some of it flows from the “*How bad could it be?*” frame of mind. Some want just to defy anything that remotely sounds like an external authority; others are drawn like a moth to the flame to whatever it is that has been labeled “harmful” “dangerous” “illicit” or even “mildly suggestive.”

Our brains defy us on this.

Do not in these next few moments think of a pink frog. Your brain almost immediately develops a picture of the very thing you have been told not to imagine. But my telling you not to imagine a fictitious amphibian has no moral force to it. Anything I tell you to blot from your mind, your mind will first need to image it because then it knows what to ignore. “*Do not imagine a jumbo jet.*” (Instant jumbo jet). “*Do not see a blue pelican.*” (Bingo, blue pelican!). “*Do not come up with the sum of two plus seven.*” (You go right to nine). Now, you may almost immediately erase the image because you want to obey the command, but in obeying, you disobey.

Again, without moral force. There are no consequences to such commands. As we play the game, you will become more adept at ignoring the command and blanking your mind to any and all images. But that is not obeying the external command, “*Do not picture a green*

*flamingo;*” that is obeying the internal command, “*Resist all imaging.*” And you will be able to do this . . . for now. But in a couple of hours, I could call you on the phone and tell you not to want pizza, and I can almost guaranteed that the majority of you would be ready to call Papa John, Donatos, or Pizza Hut.

What if there were consequences, however. Would the “game” play differently? It may. You may exert more effort into complying if you have been told that to have the image of the green flamingo would subtract ten dollars from your bank account. You may work even harder to keep out the image of the blue pelican if you knew that to imagine a blue pelican would mean to lose your right thumb.

None of which is really a matter of obeying. Obedience is not an autonomic response to suggestions. Obedience is not the lack of some autonomic or even anatomic response to outside stimuli. Our bodies are designed with many reactions, responses and reflexes built-in, usually to protect us from something that could be harmful. A snarling dog jumps in front of you on the sidewalk, and your adrenaline flows. You don’t have to think about it; it just happens. That’s a good thing — it triggers in your body the “fight or flight” reaction.

That is a reaction, a reflex. Your mind will then decide to fight or flee. You will assess if this animal is a real or unlikely threat; your brain will determine how large a threat; and then you will decide to stay and use soothing language to calm down the dog, or to use your legs and feet slowly to back away. Often, you will do both, because the brain decides that would be the most prudent course of action. You may not ever be aware that you are making a whole series of decisions. You just do it.

With obedience, some consideration must enter in. There are options seriously to be weighed. If I do “a” what will be the result? If I do “b” what consequences follow? Some consequences you know, at least in part — “*Fine for Trespassing*” “*Fines are Doubled in Work Zone.*” Some consequences you can imagine, quite precisely — “*If I take the cookies Mom said to leave alone, I will get a spanking.*” Some

consequences are hidden — *“If I live just for myself. . . that sounds like an excellent approach to life!”* But in each case some weighing of what might result enters in.

There is a reason for this. The Greek word for “obey” is ὑπακούω (hypakuo) which is quite literally translated “*to be more than hearing.*” It is one thing to hear a command or instruction ακούω (akuo); but to obey, one must go beyond, do more than hear. It is the mark of a disciple that she or he hears what the Master is saying and then goes beyond that hearing to apply what has been heard.

Saint James wrote: “*. . . be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.*” [1:22-25]

If there is one attribute of Jesus that we could emulate more fully (and there are so many!), it was that Jesus was a hearer. He listened to people in such a way that He heard behind the words, and caught the fullness of what they were saying. He came to know inner thoughts not through some magic, but through the truly penetrating act of listening. He would hear the words, but He would know the meaning beyond what the words could possibly express.

We humans communicate in ways more than verbal — our gestures, our eyes, the cast of our mouth, the quaver in our voice, the tone, the volume. But the real listening, the hearing that Jesus exercised, to which we should give most attention is His listening to His Father. When Jesus claims, “*the Father and I are one,*” [John 10:30], this is not *per se* a cosmic affirmation (albeit that certainly would be a true affirmation!) Part of what He is saying in that statement is how deeply aware He is of the Father’s will — because He spent time listening, really hearing what God wanted Him to know and do. He claimed to do what He saw His Father

doing — and nothing but that. How did He get such insight into that the Father was doing? How did He know that it was the Father who was acting? He listened. He heard. Then He went beyond hearing to do what He saw was the Father's undertaking.

We too must learn to listen. You hear many Christians (and I will avow some ersatz Christians) say that God spoke to them. We have learned to be leery of such claims, because often what is attested as a message from God runs counter to what we know to be true of God. God is love . . . yet many who say they have heard Him spout some very unloving, downright hateful venom. God is gracious . . . yet many who speak as if they speak for God deny His grace, speak only of His wrath, and project their own prejudices into God's lips. God is righteous — and it is out of His righteousness that He forgives sinners; yet many who stand to speak for God, to speak a word they say God gave to them, have no forgiveness to speak, only judgment and condemnation.

We must be very careful to listen for the voice of God — the often still, small voice. And when there is a whisper that comes to our ears (or more likely, I suspect, to our consciousness) we must measure it against what we know God has already spoken. So the other form of hearing that we desperately need is hearing the proclaimed word that comes in Scripture and in preaching.

Please note that St. James did not command us to become doers *instead of* hearers; but to be doers **“and not merely hearers”** of the Word. Hearing the Word is essential — *es-sen-tial* — to being a doers. What are you going to do? What you want? What your Aunt Tillie wants? What some politician or movie star or athlete wants? No! You are going to do what God wants — if you are what you profess to be: one who follows Christ!

That's the part that gets to obeying. You hear . . . then you go beyond hearing to do! You may not do what I do; because you may not hear what I hear. We will often hear the same thing; and that may lead us to common, even concerted action. Christ's call to feed the hungry, clothe

the naked, strengthen the weak, support those unable to fend for themselves — in short, the entire Biblical witness to “do justice” — is heard often enough to enjoin very similar “doings” on the part of many Christians.

You may hear Him saying that the way you will obey is to provide hands-on ministry: go to the shelter and fix a meal; gather furniture in your barn; knit an afghan; buy some canned goods. I may hear Him say that my obedience will entail planning, encouraging, supervising.

If we hear, and then do, we obey. Your obedience is not my obedience, nor mine yours. Yours is not better than mine; mine is no better than yours (although I might be willing to admit that some of you are better at what you do than I am at what I do to obey).

When we obey, we are truly Christ’s δουλοι (douloi). That word is translated with two different English words, and we have come to like to distinction. When we read that someone is a δουλος της ἀμαρτιας (doulos tays hamartias) that gets translated as “*a slave to sin.*” We want to be known as δουλος της χριστος (douylos tays christos) — “*a servant of Christ.*” The term δουλος means slave — we cannot dress it up to mean something different for us. And if there is one thing that is true of a slave it is this: A slave MUST DO the master’s bidding. The slave really has no choice but to obey.

To be sure, it is easier to serve a beneficent master. Indeed, one may come to delight in such service. But there comes a point in our obedience to Christ where a startling transformation takes place. Jesus says: “*I no longer call you δουλος, I now call you φιλους (philous). . . friend.*” There is a reason for this, Jesus says: “***the servant does not know what the master is doing; . . . I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.***” [John 15:15] So now, friends of Jesus, comes the time to go beyond hearing.

We are called to be obedient. We are to listen attentively to the voice of our Friend, the Friend of Sinners (which of course means that we must

admit that we belong to that rather inclusive club!) We are to discern what He tells us about ourselves, about what God wants for us and from us, about where we can invest our lives. And then we have to do it.

In this, as in all else, Christ is our model. So we had better give due heed to the writer of Hebrews when he tells us that Christ ***“learned obedience through what he suffered.”*** [5:8] That will likely be our mode for learning, as well. But listen to the Friend . . . not just “suffering” as if any pain qualifies . . . listen, listen: ***“No one takes [my life] from me, I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”*** [John 10:18] He listened . . . then he went beyond hearing.

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Amen.