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DOING VS BEING

Psalm 139: 1-6; John 1: 43-51

A new year has begun. The new year is a time for resolutions. How many of you have made some new year's resolutions? I have. Actually, it's a resolution I've made before. My resolution is this: I'd like to spend more time being rather than just doing. I find that, too often, doing gets in the way of being and distracts me from the focus necessary to being. What do I mean? Let me begin with an important book written just a few years ago. The book is called: "The Road to Character" by New York Times bestselling author: David Brooks.

Brooks starts the book by discussing "virtues." Virtues are qualities that make for good character. Here's what he writes: "Recently I've been thinking about the difference between the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. The resume virtues are the ones you list on your resume, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being – whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed. Most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the resume virtues, but I confess that for long stretches of my life I've spent more time thinking about the latter than the former. Our education system is certainly oriented around the resume virtues more than the eulogy ones. Public conversation is, too – the self-help tips in magazines, the nonfiction bestsellers. Most of us have clearer strategies for how to achieve career success than we do for how to develop profound character..."

Brooks goes on to refer to a book by a Jewish Rabbi who describes us human beings as having within us two opposing sides. One side of us is career-oriented and ambitious. We want to build, create, produce and discover things. We want to achieve greater status and win victories. But there's another side to us, too. This side wants to embody moral qualities. We want to be something. We want to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong, not only to do good but to be good. We want to love intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some higher truth, to discover our inner possibilities while honouring all creation. We want to be rather than just do so that our doing comes from a deeper being.

But how do we do this? Brooks goes on to develop his theme by telling some amazing stories. But he also explains how the development of our character is thwarted repeatedly by social pressures to succeed in the world. The pressure to do overwhelms our deeper need to be.

Another writer – Francis Ambrosio – makes the distinction between heroes and saints. We all have this inner desire to be heroes. Heroes thrive on honour and being honoured. It's all about recognition and admiration. What contribution can we make in society? How much do we achieve in our field or area of concern? How much do others admire, recognize and praise what we do? The saint, on the other hand, is not driven by goals that are linked to the evaluation of others. The saint is driven by a higher purpose. How do I live love, compassion, concern and care for others in the world? How is who I am inside connected to what I do on the outside?

Well, answering such questions is what our scripture readings are all about. So, let's delve into them for some revelatory insight. And let's start with Psalm 139. This is a popular psalm. After Psalm 23 and maybe one or two others, psalm 139 is a favourite. But that surprises me. It surprises me because the inner experience the psalm describes can make many of us really uncomfortable. The psalmist is describing his inner life as totally known and totally visible before God: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away... even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely..." So how does that make you feel? Imagine everything you think and feel 24/7 totally known. Nothing is hidden from God. Isn't that scary? We all have things about us, secret things we wouldn't want most people to know about, no? We all have things about us and in us that can make us feel ashamed, things we wouldn't want to reveal or hold up as exemplary characteristics, no?

And yet, for the psalmist, an experience of being known inside and out is not cause for fear, but rejoicing. Being known so fully and deeply, and being loved... how liberating and reassuring! Our relationship with God and our relationship with the deepest part of ourselves is connected. **Unless we receive the revelation that we are loved as we are, flaws and limitations and all, how can we find genuine motivation to become even better?** It's not about making excuses for bad behaviour and bad qualities. It's about knowing that we are loved despite that.

It's the total opposite in the world outside us. We are being measured and evaluated all the time. Based on what we do, we are evaluated in terms of who we are; and because we are so dependent on such external evaluations and measurements, it encourages us to falsify, pretend, and show up what we can do while hiding those parts of us we are more afraid will lead to criticism and rejection. Soon enough, we develop layers to ourselves and our doing becomes disconnected from deeper affirmations of our being. We are doing in order to be loved not because we are loved. We are achieving because this will make us accepted and admired and this will persuade us we matter. What a terrible foundation to be human.

And yet, the pressure to be false this way because we are looking for acceptance and love externally is huge. It starts when we're children and only grows as we age. How can we get stripped of all that false need and find ourselves before God again as we are, loved and treasured in our naked being? We don't have to pretend, and we don't have to live pretence. Whether others accept us or not, we are not so dependent. The core relationship in our life is with God and everything else is measured accordingly.

And so, Psalm 139 reminds us that we can only become our best self and develop our best self when we stop enough to be before God, accept that we are accepted, love ourselves as God loves us, because only on such a foundation will we have something worthwhile with which to love and bless the world around us.

But this also leads to a further question: How does who we are on the inside shape how we engage others in the world? What do we look for in others based on what we value in ourselves?

Jesus begins his public ministry not only by preaching and healing. He also calls individuals to follow him, to become disciples. To be a disciple is to be a student. How much do we want to learn from Jesus about what it means to be a child of God in the depths of our being? Jesus needs people who will learn how to be before God so that true inspiration and blessing can flow out into the world. Jesus needs people who will learn how to be before God so that he can build a kingdom community of inspiration to bless the world. So, what is Jesus looking for in people?

In our gospel reading, Jesus calls specific individuals. One such individual is a man called Nathaniel. What is it about Nathaniel that makes him a ready candidate for becoming a disciple of inspiration and blessing? "When Jesus saw Nathaniel coming to him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'" The Greek word translated as deceit is *'dolos'*. *Dolos* means false, pretentious, dishonest, deceptive, two-faced, hypocritical. Nathaniel is the opposite of *dolos*. He is genuine, real, free of pretences or falsity. Because he is real, he is looking for something real. He won't get dazzled by Jesus' powerful oratory, his spectacular gift of healing, his charisma, what he can get for himself if he joins the Jesus party. No. He wants to see into Jesus' soul, his character, his being. He's not interested in getting praise and admiration, in winning and getting on top. What he wants and what he needs is something deeper and richer. He's hungry for authenticity. Jesus will teach him how authenticity of being and authenticity of love go together.

Nathaniel is in a place inside where Jesus wants to meet all people. The problem is that too many of us are so caught up with pretences before others and the need to be accepted,

loved, recognized and admired by the people around us, that we cannot be so trusting and free to open up ourselves to just be before God and before others.

The problem is that this reveals how little faith we have in God. Others may not see into us, but can we ever hide ourselves from God? If we have a genuine relationship of openness with God, can we not find inspiration to develop a little more openness, honesty and sincerity in our relationships with others?

Yes, some of us have been hurt. Some of us have been disappointed. Some of us have been betrayed in some way, used and abused even. But we need to find our way back to authenticity and openness of being. Only as we are free of deceit and free to grow into being more authentically, can we find the true treasure of life – genuine love. And only as we take up practices in life like good worship, practices that help us get grounded again and again in authenticity of being, only then will our doing become more purposeful and fulfilling a blessing to the world.

Jesus is calling Nathaniel... In this new year, this season of Epiphany as Jesus begins his ministry again, he is calling individuals like you and me also. Will we follow? Will we become disciples – students of Jesus' way of being?

Amen.