Book 6

Sunday August 29, 1976

"TO HELL WITH IT!"

Isaiah 40:28-31
Matthew 6:19-21, 25-27, 34
Matthew 10:1, 7-14

Recently, I overheard two women talking. One of them was very upset because she heard that the neighbors were accusing her son of breaking their window. "He couldn't have done it, " she told her friend, "he hasn't been out of the house in two days." "Look," I heard the other woman say, "If your son didn't break that window, you know it, and God knows it--and it doesn't matter what the neighbors think." After a thoughtful pause, the first woman said, "You're right. I'm going to take a spiritual attitude and say, 'to hell with it.'"

That can be a spiritual attitude! According to the Bible Dictionary, in Hebrew the word "hell" means simply, place of the dead. That's the way it's used throughout the Old Testament. So when a person says, "to hell with it," about some issue or problem that's bothering him or her, it means, let the issue be dead. It's not worth my time and energy. I have more important things to do. If that's the sense in which the phrase is used, it is a spiritual attitude. Of course there are other times in our lives when such an attitude could be a cop-out, a way of avoiding or escaping a difficult decision or action. But that's not our concern this morning.

There are times in our lives as Christians when we need to say--"To hell with it!"

1. First we need to be able to say to hell with it when we find ourselves putting too much emphasis on gaining things which have no lasting value.

That's what Jesus Christ was getting at in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal."

There are times when we need to stop all our striving and grabbing for things which perish anyway. Being able to say, "to hell with it," is to accept the fact that many

things we work so hard for are perishable, they go away. Sometimes we need to relax the grasping hand and just stop, and look and listen and appreciate and gain a sense of direction. As Jesus said, "Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?" On the other hand by being anxious we can certainly shorten our lives.

2. Secondly, we need to be able to say "to hell with it" as far as our failures are concerned. We need to lay our failures aside.

Jesus Christ knew this also. After he had chosen his 12 disciples and given them some training, at one point he sent them out to teach, preach and heal diseases. And he gave them some good instructions as we heard in part of our scripture reading for this morning. He said, among other things, "And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay with him until you depart. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town."

In other words, sometimes you are going to have to say--"to hell with it." You're not going to be successful in every town or with every house. I don't know of any salesman who makes a sale with every call.

Jesus was telling his disciples--don't waste your time trying to work with people who won't receive you, whose minds are closed. Move on! There are some things not worthy bothering with. Shaking the dust of one's feet is a way of shaking off failure. We're going to fail sometimes. And when we do fail, the spiritual attitude is to shake it off. Don't carry the failure with you. If we keep carrying all our failures around with us, the load will be too heavy. Thus often in athletic contests, we can hear one athlete say to another after a mistake or a missed basket or punt, "shake it off."

Of course we are to learn from our failures, but that's something quite different than always carrying the failure with you. So there are times when we need to say of our failures, "To hell with it."

3. Thirdly, like the mother in the story whose son was falsely accused of breaking a window, there are times in all of our lives when we need to take no action at all, but rather simply say, "to hell with it," and let it go.

A few weeks ago, I came across a newspaper column which underscored this theme. The columnist, Mr. Russell Baker noted that if Richard Nixon had said, "to hell with it," when Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers to the press, he would not have established the White House Plumbers to stop leakage, and McCord and Liddy would not have gone to the Watergate.

If McCord and Liddy at dinner that evening had said, "To hell with it, let's have another lobster and go home, they would not have been arrested later that night and Woodward and Bernstein would still be two struggling reporters.

If Nixon had said, "To hell with it," when somebody told him he should tape all his conversations for history, he would've introduced the next Republican candidate for President at the convention in Kansas City two weeks ago.

The possibilities are endless. If Senator Edward Kennedy had said, "To hell with it," when his friends invited him to a barbecue at Chappaquidick, Jimmy Carter would still be in the peanut business.

If presidents for generations had said, "To hell with it," when the F.B.I. and C.I.A. came to them and said, "Guess what amusing, yet useful criminal tasks we can secretly perform for you all under the cover of national security. . .

The point is there are times in all of our lives when we need to make distinctions as to what is truly important and what is not important. We need to know when to act and when to say--"to hell with it." There are times when we need to make the decision to lay things aside, to take a spiritual attitude and let the issue be dead and not bother with it.

There are times when to do nothing is the best thing to do. Now this may surprise you, but there are several ways of doing nothing, of saying to hell with it. Many people think they are doing nothing when they are merely doing something trivial, such as fiddling at something or dawdling,

or playing solitaire, or worrying about the work they should be doing.

a.) There is the pessimistic way of doing nothing or of saying, "to hell with it." This kind of person believes the world is going to pieces anyway, so why do anything, why waste your time, and so this kind of person merely wrings his or her hands in despair. That kind of inactivity, of doing nothing will probably help the world go to pieces.

b.) There is also the status quo reason for doing nothing. This type of person believes in keeping things as they are. He or she is afraid of any kind of change. The best way, this person reasons, to keep things as they are, is to do nothing. But changes come and go regardless of our activity or inactivity, so this is the wrong kind of doing nothing.

c.)Another way of doing nothing and of saying to hell with it is out of frustration and anger. It is an angry or frustrated inactivity like that of a person who is watching a neighborhood fight and is waiting for someone else to arrive to try and do something. He or she is content to wait on the sidelines, not because nothing needs to be done, but because that person is either too frustrated, or too angry, or too afraid to do anything. Usually such a person watches with mounting anger as the fight continues and his wrath issues in words of exasperation and condemnation. Having tied his own hands, he fights with his tongue and only makes matters worse.

I'll bet you hadn't realized that there are so many different ways of doing nothing.

d.) Well there's one more way of doing nothing, or of saying "to hell with it," and that is the Christian way. Sometimes we are to do nothing because of our ultimate trust in God--because of our faith that there is a loving power behind and throughout all the universe--because of our faith that all things work together for good for those who love God. So sometimes we patiently wait and do nothing for the time being because it's a trustful waiting. It's an inactivity and a waiting that is filled with hope and not despair. This does not mean that we all the time do nothing. Rather it's a realization that there is a time for inactivity as well as a time for action.

In other words there is an art and a grace of doing nothing at certain times--an art of knowing when to wait and when to act. Sometimes too we need more practitioners of the art of doing nothing to counter-balance the folks who are always painfully and hastily doing the wrong thing. These are the people who are always saying--for goodness sakes do something, without even considering what's the best thing to do.

Sometimes in such situations, our hasty activity, just so we can say that we did something, only makes the matter worse. We fall victim to Forrester's law," a maxim which holds that "In complicated situations efforts to improve things often tend to make them worse, sometimes much worse, and on occasion calamitous."

Dr. Jay W. Forrester, a Professor of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Nebraska native, states that we can often expect surprising and dismaying results from naive reforms that fail to take into account the many and diverse ways individuals and groups can react to even the simplest, let alone the most complex changes in the social environment.

There is a parable in the New Testament which Jesus told which is similar to Forrester's law--the parable of the wheat and the weeds. In that parable, Jesus points out that often in our hasty attempts to do good, to root out the evil, to pull out the weeds in society, we destroy the wheat as well and make matters worse. Furthermore, Jesus said, we do not always know the difference between the wheat and the weeds, between good and evil, so when we are pulling out the weeds, we are actually pulling out the good wheat. In another parable, Jesus told how we often cast out one evil spirit and then in the vacuum, seven other spirits more evil than the first, enter and dwell there and the last state of that person is worse than the first.

These parables, like knowing when to say, "to hell with it," counsel us to remember that in spite of our good intentions, we cannot by simply rushing around in a flurry of activity solve all the world's problems or all of our own problems, sometimes in our haste we only make matters worse.

Our Christian faith does not counsel a do-nothing attitude all the time, but reminds us that there is a time for

waiting and a time for action. So there you have it. To be able to say "to hell with it," in the right way and at the right time, can be a spiritual attitude. Try it this week when you find yourself putting too much emphasis on the things which are not eternal. Try it with your failures. You have no need to keep carrying them around with you--shake them off. And try this spiritual attitude when you find yourself wanting to rush in and quickly straighten things out. Amen.