Thursday, November 3, 1994
TO HELL WITH IT
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 in the Old Testament. So when a person says, “to hell with it,” about some issue or problem that’s bothering them, 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 context 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 tonight.

There are times in all of our lives as Christians when we need to take a spiritual attitude and say, “to hell with it.”

First, we need to be able to say, “to hell with it,” when we find ourselves putting too much emphasis on gaining things and owning things that have no lasting value.
That’s what Jesus was talking about 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 that 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.

The parable Jesus told about the farmer who already had so much that he had no place to store it all, so he decided to build even bigger barns so that he could store away more, is another example. In the parable, Jesus called this man a fool. He had not learned when to say “to hell with it.” Sometimes we need to relax the grasping hand and simply stop, look, listen, appreciate, and gain a sense of perspective and direction. As Jesus said, “Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his or her span of life?” On the other hand, being anxious can certainly shorten our lives. Sometimes we need to take a spiritual attitude and say “to hell with it” when we are working too hard to achieve success in worldly terms.

Second, we need to learn to say “to hell with it” as far as our failures are concerned. We need to learn to leave our failures behind.
Jesus knew this and talked with his disciples about it. After he had chosen the twelve and given them some training, he then had them do some fieldwork. He sent them out to teach, preach, and heal. And he gave them some good instructions, as we heard in our scripture reading this evening.

He said, among other things, “And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay with him or her 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 anyone 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, with every house, or with every individual you meet. I don’t know of any salesperson who makes a sale on 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 worth bothering with. Shaking the dust off one’s feet is a way of shaking off failure. Don’t carry your failure with you. Leave it behind. Shake it off. Take a spiritual attitude and say, “to hell with it.”

If you keep carrying all your failures around with you all the time, the load will be too heavy. In athletics, we often hear the coach say to a player after they have made an error, “shake it off.”

Of course, we can learn from our failures, and we should. We can often learn more from our failures than from our successes. But that’s something quite different from carrying the failure with you. So there are times when we need to take a spiritual attitude toward our failures and say, “to hell with it.”

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

Some of you might remember when President Nixon got into trouble over Watergate and finally resigned. Mr. Russell Baker, a newspaper columnist, wrote in one of his columns at that time 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 the leaking, and McCord and Liddy would not have gone to Watergate.

Or 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 in the next Republican Convention.

The point is there are times in all of our lives when we need to make distinctions as to what is truly important to do and what is not important. We need to know when to act and when to say, “to hell with it,” and do nothing.

It sounds like a contradiction, but there are times when to do nothing, to take no action is the best thing to do.

Let’s take a little detour here on this subject of “doing nothing.” There are several ways and reasons for doing nothing.

a) There is the pessimistic reason for doing and 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?

b) There is 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.

c) Another reason for doing nothing is because of frustration and fear. It is the fearful 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 sideline, not because nothing needs to be done, but because that person is either too frustrated or too afraid to do anything.

d) Then there’s the spiritual way of saying “to hell with it” and doing nothing. 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 God 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 a waiting, a doing nothing that is filled with hope and not despair.

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. Perhaps 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 because they act too quickly.

There are times when acting too quickly can only make the matter worse. We fall victim to “Forrester’s Law,” a maxim that 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 that 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 evil, or to pull out the weeds, we destroy the good wheat as well and make matters worse.

The parable suggests that in the early stages of growth, we cannot always tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds, between good and evil, so when we are pulling out weeds, we might be destroying the good wheat as well.

In another parable, Jesus told how, in our haste to cast out one evil spirit, we can create a vacuum where seven other spirits, more evil than the first, enter, leaving the last state of that person worse than the former.

These parables, like knowing when to say “to hell with it,” counsel us to remember that in spite of our good intentions, we cannot simply rush around in a flurry of activity to solve all the world’s problems or our own. In our haste to do something, we might make matters worse.

Our Christian faith is not suggesting 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 things that do not have lasting value. 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 too quickly and straighten things out. Amen.