

“What Jesus Did Not Do”

a sermon by

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Text: “When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten....”
(I Peter 1:23).

This past week our nation mourned the death of former President Ronald Reagan. Throughout the week there have been a number of tributes to this remarkable man and to the years of the 1980s, which are sometimes referred to as the “Reagan Era.”

Over the months and years ahead there will be, no doubt, many assessments over the legacy that the 40th President leaves behind. Presidential historians will discuss in detail the many things that Ronald Reagan did: the arms race with the USSR that ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union; the sense of confidence and hope that he brought to the nation; the great popularity that the President enjoyed during his tenure in office as well as the growing affection after he had left office. Other things will be discussed that are a part of the Reagan

legacy--many of these not so popular: the Iran /Contra Affair and the massive deficits that were left behind.

One of the things that fascinated me about Ronald Reagan was not just the things he did, but also the things he didn't do. He didn't take himself too seriously. Early in his Presidency many people were shocked that he seemed to work at a rather leisurely pace. Often he took Wednesday afternoon off. When asked about this, he replied, "While he didn't believe hard work would kill a person, he didn't want to take a chance." During the 1984 Presidential race against Walter Mondale many people expressed concern about the President's age (he was then 74 years old). When asked during one of the Presidential debates if he thought the question of age should be a factor in the election, the President replied by saying that he thought the question of age should not be a factor in the election. Then he quipped, "It would not be fair to discriminate against Senator Mondale because of his youth."

I.

In the years following the death of Christ there were individuals who set down to record their recollections. That was true of the gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They often remember the things he had done: the mighty acts of healing and feeding, the profound teachings, and encounters with people. They remembered the obedient and courageous way he faced death. They recorded their conviction that death was not the end of the matter for Jesus but bore witness to his resurrection as well.

One of the most interesting observations of the life of Jesus came from his disciple Simon Peter, who wrote the Letters in the New Testament that bear his name. When the Book of I Peter was written, Simon Peter was an elderly man, writing a letter to his fellow Christians in Asia Minor and in a glowing paragraph set forth his recollection of the Christ. As Peter remembered the one whom he had served, his first remembrance was not something that Jesus did, but something he did not do. Peter, in speaking of Jesus, put it like this: "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten" (I Peter 2:23). So, Peter was not just impressed by what Jesus did, he was impressed by what Jesus didn't do and I believe that forms the basis of a person's character.

II.

In the first place, great character is not always rooted in great activity and business but in great inner resources. Jesus had that capacity. He was not bitter; he was not resentful. In fact, one of the things that made such an impression on Peter was that Jesus was the exact opposite of Peter. The Gospels make it plain that Peter was an ardent firebrand of man who acted impetuously. When the soldiers arrested Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, it was Peter who took a sword and cut the ear off one of the Romans. It was also Peter who, when he saw Jesus walking on the water, got out of the boat and tried to walk to Jesus. But it was also Peter who, when Jesus, asked the question to the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" responded by saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

In this week's *New Yorker Magazine* there is an article about a "suicide poem" that was allegedly written by Abraham Lincoln and published in the Springfield, Illinois, newspaper in 1836. Most historians believe that Lincoln was subject to terrible bouts of depression and was at times may have been suicidal.

He certainly had great reason for melancholy. He was hated in the South and the North. He was finally assassinated by John Wilkes Booth.

But there was something else about Lincoln. When almost everyone was bitter, he was not. When many voices called for vengeance, he did not. He was reviled, but he reviled not. In his Second Inaugural Address he said, in addressing the South, "With malice toward none and with charity to all."

That was true for the Apostle Paul as well. Certainly, he had suffered. Listen to this account in II Corinthians: "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked for a night and a day. I was adrift at sea, on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city." (II Corinthians 11: 24ff.)

To be sure, Paul suffered. But listen to what he wrote to the church at Rome. "Suffering," he wrote, "produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:1-5).

III.

In the second place, great character is always related to great faith. Now sometimes people have difficulty speaking of faith. For some faith is credulity; it is believing what you know is not true. But that is not how the Bible understands faith. Look at the ways it is used.

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

"Your faith has made thee well" (Matthew 9:22).

"Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Romans 5:1).

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).

Faith is not credulity; it is a person's inner commitment to convictions and causes and persons that seem supremely true and worthwhile. If that is faith's meaning, then we clearly cannot have depth of character without it. The real opposites of faith are cynicism, disillusionment, a sense of futility, and the feeling that life comes from nowhere, means nothing, and is going nowhere.

Jesus certainly embodied faith. Time and time again he was opposed by the religious leaders of his day. They criticized him and his disciples because they refused to obey the strict rules of fasting. In fact, the religious leaders called Jesus and his disciples “gluttons and wine bibbers.” They criticized Jesus because he performed acts of mercy on the Sabbath. He healed a man with a withered hand. He picked corn from a grain field to feed his disciples. They criticized him because in the Sermon on the Mount he saw a “higher righteousness” than the legalistic righteousness of the Mosaic law.

Jesus saw that the religion of his own day had run dry. The practitioners of religion emphasized the “letter of the law,” but they disregarded the spirit of it. The Twenty Third Chapter of Matthew’s gospel is one of the most devastating attacks on religion in all of literature. In that chapter Jesus called the leaders of his day “blind guides.” They could not lead others because they themselves were blind. There were “whited sepulchers”--outside they looked clean, but inside they were filled with dead men’s bones.

One of the tributes paid to former President Ronald Reagan this past week was written by Paul Kengor in the Wall Street Journal. In that article the author noted that Ronald Reagan’s faith had a profound effect on his policies. Nowhere, writes Kengor, was that more evident than in his view of Soviet Communism. Reagan was born not long before the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917, and he lived to watch its collapse. During his presidency he called for a “crusade” to undermine the Soviet regime. But, it was not just the regime’s repressive nature that inspired a sense of mission in him, or its ghastly record of blood and suffering. It was the official atheism of Soviet communism that angered him most. He told a joint session of the Irish National Parliament in June 1984 that the “struggle between freedom and totalitarianism today was ultimately not a test of arms or missiles but a test of faith and spirit.” It was, in the end, he noted, “a spiritual struggle.”

IV.

In the third place, the kind of character that Jesus demonstrated was rooted in the depth of an inner spiritual life.

There was something about Jesus that not only preached God’s grace, but also that lived that grace. He said to a woman taken in the act of adultery, “Go, and sin no more.” He said to a crooked tax collector name Zaccheus, a man who had defrauded others but was willing to face his mistakes and to assume accountability for what he had done, “Today salvation has come to this house.” On the cross he said of those who had crucified him, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

One of the most remarkable Commencement Addresses ever given in this country was delivered in 1947 by General George Marshall to the graduating class of Harvard University. General Marshall had been invited the year before as part of Harvard’s victory celebration of the ending of World War II, but he was unable to attend. So on June 5, 1947 he received an honorary degree from Harvard and gave one of the commencement addresses. The address consisted of 1200 words and lasted for only 12 minutes. Some who heard it called it “routine” and

“uninspiring.” It ended up being the most important commencement address ever given at Harvard University. In that speech General Marshall outlined what was later to be called “The Marshall Plan,” a massive program of assistance from the United States to Europe to help rebuild a defeated continent. The Marshall Plan was a superior example of enlightened self interest in which the United States reached out to a defeated nation in an act that W.H. Auden described as a ‘friend to the future.’”

I think it was this kind of inner resource that impressed Peter, as he remembered Jesus. He knew Jesus had been reviled. He knew he had been reviled. He knew he had been abused. He knew he had suffered. But in each of these cases he never returned evil.

In his book *The Quiet American Graham*, Greene writes about a debauched British journalist named Fowler. He is a reporter who lives in Vietnam in the dying days of the French occupation of that country. He was very cynical about the French, the Vietnamese, the Americans, and even himself. As he once put it, “I envied those who could believe in a God, and I distrusted them. I felt they were keeping their courage up with a fable of the changeless and the permanent. Death, “he writes, “Was far more certain than God.” In the end he writes, “How I wish there existed someone to whom I could say I was sorry.”

Contrast that view of life to the view that the Apostle Paul expressed when he wrote, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.”

That is what Jesus demonstrated in his life and death--depth of character, depth of faith, and depth of inner resources.

Thanks be to God! Amen!