

Starting Late is Better than Lip Service

When I was a child, I always fought going to bed. It must have been quite a scene, because my brother-in-law still talks about it. He was dating my much-older sister, so he had a front-row seat to the row that I created with my mother every evening. I suspect that my father was gone at bedtime; he was often at church meetings, so he wasn't around to help. According to my sister, our mother was pretty clueless when it came to dealing with children. Apparently I took full advantage of that.

I don't know how old I was when I finally went to bed peacefully. At some point I must have figured out that it didn't do any of us any good to be so combative. I do know that by the time I was in high school, I had to get up at the crack of dawn in order to be at school on time. I traveled a good forty-five minutes on two city bus routes, and school started before 8 a.m. So I always went to bed at a reasonable hour unless I had to write a paper or study for a test.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in today's Gospel story I identify with the son who said to his father, "No, I will not" and then later changed his mind. Over time I've learned to say "let me think about that" and then give a more reasoned answer after some reflection. In all truth, I've also said, "Sure, I'll do that" and then spent much time and energy trying to cover up the fact that I didn't do it after all. I really could be either son. Jesus asks a simple question about them: which one did the will of the father? The answer is clear: only the one who actually did the work. One commentator calls this parable "starting late is better than lip service."

The parable is about more than just starting late, however. The first son changed his mind, and the Greek word for that carries with it a sense of regret, of second thoughts, of wishing that what was done could be undone. That son was truly sorry that he had offended his father by blowing him off. He couldn't take back his words, but he could do the work he had refused to do. The second son shows no regret at all. Perhaps, like me, he may have spent his time trying to cover up the fact that he did nothing.

It's pretty clear in the Bible, and in life, that what we do carries more weight than what we say. The letter of James famously says that faith without works is dead. Jesus said that even if you won't believe the words that I say, believe the works that I do. The people of Israel believed Moses because of the works *he* did in the name of the Lord, although it's obvious they had pretty short memories. Moses wasn't always happy with the grumbling bunch, either. In today's reading he goes so far as to name where they are, Massah and Meribah, meaning Test and Quarrel. How'd you like to live in a place called Quarrel? Or attend Conflict Memorial Church?

When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church in Philippi, a church that he loved, he told them how to do what Jesus did: be rooted and grounded in love. Imitate Christ, especially his humility. Embedded in Paul's letter is an early Christian hymn that probably predates Paul himself. It's often called the "kenosis" hymn after the Greek word for emptying. The hymn describes the pre-existent Word of God, eternally present in the fullness of God, who emptied himself in order to be born as a human. As a human he continued to humble himself, being put to an excruciating death on a cross. Because of that humility, God exalted him, so that at the name of Jesus *every* knee should bend and *every* tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Humility. One son in the parable had it, so he started late even though he initially said “No.” The other son lacked humility and only paid lip service. Humility is why Jesus said that the tax collectors and prostitutes will go into the kingdom of heaven before the religious leaders. The tax collectors and prostitutes know that they have done wrong. They have second thoughts and repent. Having had a change of heart, they choose to do the work of God rather than lead their former lives. The rest are too proud. They say “yes, sir” to God and then do what they want rather than what God wants.

Each of us is given a choice in today’s parable. Jesus could not make it any clearer. God is willing to put up a response of with “Go away, God. Don’t bother me today” as long as we come around later after some reflection. God wants our love, our worship, and especially our work for his kingdom. Yet how many times do we say “Sure thing, God!” and then go our own way? How many times do we have to learn again that such a response is not going to turn out well?

I know myself well enough to realize that my inner child’s desire to say “No!” will always be there. I’ll also be tempted to be a “yes-child” even when I have no intention to do what was asked. The goal for me and for all of us, of course, is to say “Yes!” to God and then follow through. I recognize that it’s a goal. We are all works in progress. Fortunately, God has a lot of patience. God knows we will get there, but it will take us all of our lives to reach it. In the meantime, like the Israelites in the desert, we travel by stages, trusting that God will provide food and water for the journey even when we grumble. Our food is Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. As the hymn we will sing at the end of this service says:

*Name him, Christians, name him, with love as strong as death,
Name with awe and wonder and with bated breath;
He is God the savior, he is Christ the Lord,
Ever to be worshipped, trusted, and adored.*

[Pentecost 16: Exodus 17:1-17; Psalm 78; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32. The sermon title is from John Nolland’s *The Gospel of Matthew* in The New International Greek Testament Commentary series. It’s Nolland’s title for Mt 21:28-32. The Hymn is verse four of “At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.”]