

Almighty God, Source of all, Living Word, Holy Spirit:

may your Word only be spoken, and Your voice only be heard. Amen.

One of the expressions I use the most often – usually when writing a long overdue thank you note, is “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” I don’t know who coined that very useful aphorism, but it could well have come from the parable Jesus tells today.

Jesus is in the midst of yet another interrogation by the religious leaders – they are trying both to test him, and to trap him, for by this time he has worn out his welcome with them.

They demand to know who’s backing him – though when he says he moves on the authority of the Father in heaven who sent him, it usually makes them go ballistic. But Jesus is clever and cagy in this encounter, and asks them a counter question, one that they can’t answer without making either the leaders, or the people, angry. They refuse to answer, giving Jesus license to do the same. Check.

But Jesus hasn’t finished with them. He asks them this little parable about the two sons, one who says, “Sure,” but doesn’t do what he said; the other who refuses but comes through in the end. He lobs them an easy pitch, and they answer. But he’s not done. Now he brings John the Baptist back into the conversation. He says it is those “sinners” who recognized and responded to John’s call to repent, who turned their lives around, who “get it.” Not the “professionally religious” who talk a good talk – these “walk the walk, and they’re going to be walking right into the Kingdom before the good guys, who think that being right with God is a matter of going through the motions, wearing the right clothes, saying the right prayers in the right order. Check mate.

Which son do you feel like this morning... promise maker or avoider who does it later? one who’s made the promises and goes through the motions, or one who’s turned from another way of life into the Kingdom?

I once attended a Celebration of Recovery service – and that room was full of “first brothers,” people who had no intention of living in the Kingdom of God – but in the depths of addiction turned toward God and found life there.

Is Jesus giving the advantage to people who make a conversion mid-stream, over those of us who were born and raised and “do the church thing.” Those folks on the margins, Jesus is suggesting, might have better seats in the Kingdom than those of us who work to feed, clothe and house them. Hmmm. How does that feel?

That depends on how much we are or are not like the Pharisees and religious leaders Jesus was addressing. It’s not a matter of who God loves more. It’s a matter of how clearly you see yourself, and how much you recognize you need God’s power in your life. Those who are pretty darn sure they can make it just fine without any help, thank you very much – those are the ones who need to look out. Here’s another helpful aphorism: Pride goeth before a fall! There was nothing wrong with the “righteousness” of the religious leaders. It was their self-sufficiency that was the problem.

As soon as we think we’ve “got it,” we’ve achieved just the right balance, we often start to go it alone.

We say, “Sure, I’m coming to the fields,” but we think saying it is enough. We figure we’ll “get in” on the strength of our responsibility, not our openness to God’s spirit.

This tension is perfectly captured in something Paul writes to the church in Philippi, which ends the reading we heard this morning:

Therefore, my beloved... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

If you only read the first part, “Work out your own salvation....” you come pretty close to what I consider to be one of the most destructive aphorisms in the world, “God helps those who help themselves.” Which is not in the Bible anywhere.

But if you only read “work out your own salvation in fear and trembling,” you’re going to live like it’s all up to you. But that’s not what Paul wrote.

for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Jesus invites us to be both brothers – to feel the fear and trembling when we take a good look at ourselves, and to allow the Spirit of God to shape our wills.

The people who say, “no thanks, not interested” to the life of faith – but end up turning away from false gods and relinquishing false sense of control, and letting God’s love in – they see that it is only by God’s power that they are enabled to will and work for good.

But as long as we think we’re just fine, just a few little flaws, but nothing needing serious attention from the Maker of the Universe – we tend to live like we can achieve salvation on our own, no need of a savior like Jesus. There’s a little bit of “Pharisee” in most everybody. Jesus put the emphasis on believing – believing he is who he said he was. That’s who’s skating into heaven, not the ones who “do good.”

The story we tell has claims on us, my friends.

We are invited not only to tell it, but to believe it, and live it.

Paul tells this community at Philippi how Christ’s believers are to live, but he knows it’s not human nature to put the interests of others above your own. He doesn’t tell them they can rewire themselves by grit and determination.

He tells them to put on the mind of Christ, which is a gift God gives us.

And the promise is that one day every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.

We don’t know how or when God will bring that about.

All we know is that we are to confess Jesus as Lord,

and not only with our lips, but in our lives, giving up our selves to His service.

The great promise of this passage is that God is at work in us, enabling us to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The way of Jesus is to get out of the way, pouring ourselves out, putting others’ interest ahead of our own, and being replenished by that living stream of Holy Spirit power that comes into us.

If we don’t pour it out, the flow stops.

If we give it, we will be filled, and the world will be blessed through us.

Amen.

Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

Philippians 2:1-13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.