

“Two Brothers”

In the name of the God who loves us all, grace to you and peace.

If there had been an inquest into Jesus' death, the parable of the two brothers, today's gospel reading, would probably have been presented as one of the things that got him killed. According to Matthew, Jesus told it during the last week of his life in Jerusalem – after he had stolen a donkey to ride into town on, after he had chased the merchants out of the temple, after he had cursed the fig tree for failing to bear fruit – he went back to the temple to teach, and that is where the chief priests and the elders cursed him. The main thing they wanted to know was who had given him authority to do all these things. Who, they want to know, did he think he was?

Instead of answering them, Jesus did something that was very typical for him. He asked them a questions – “What do you think?” – and he told them a story. It took a little longer than giving them a straight answer, but Jesus was never one to give people answers they could come up with on their own. He knew truth is something people have to discover for themselves, so he went to the extra trouble of helping them do that, even when he knew it might backfire on him.

The story he told the chief priests and elders that day was the story of the yes and No brothers, or at least we will call them brothers. In Matthew's Greek, they were simply two children, old enough to work in the family vineyard but still working out their relationship with their father. When he asked each of them in turn to go to work in the vineyard, the No brother said he would not go but later changed his mind and went. The yes brother said he would go but never did. Which brother, Jesus asked his critics, did the will of his father?

It was an easy answer, as easy for them as it is for us. The first brother did the will of his father, of course. It was not what either boy said that mattered but what he finally did. Only that was not the part of the truth that got Jesus killed. What got him killed was the second part, when he told the chief priests and elders which brother they were. They were the Yes man, he told them, who said all the right things, believed all the right things, stand for all the right things, but would not do the right things God asked them to do.

They thought they were doing the right things, mind you, but they had gotten so attached to their own ideas about what these things were that it was hard for them to accept much correction. First John the Baptist and then Jesus suggested that they trade in their beliefs for a fresh experience of God, but they could not bring themselves to do that. They said yes to God while they acted out a great big NO to Jesus, who suggested that they might be in for a great big surprise.

People they despised were going into the kingdom ahead of them, he told them – not instead of them, but ahead of them – people who may have said not at the beginning but who changed their minds and went, while those who refused to go continued to mistake their own convictions for obedience to God.

On the one hand, it is just one more story about hypocrisy, which has always been the number one charge levelled religious people – that we say one thing and do another, promising we will love each other on Sunday, and finding a dozen ways to slander or just plain ignore each other on Monday. It is a serious charge against those who pretend goodness, wearing a fake fur of faith in God in order to gain advantage over other people. But I do not think conscious pretense is the real problem. I am much more concerned about the unconscious way many of us substitute our beliefs about God for our obedience to God, as if it were enough to say, “I go, sir” without ever tensing a muscle to get out of our chaos.

I do not know how it starts. Maybe we have such good imaginations that we actually believe we have done things we have really only thought about doing. Have you ever thought about visiting a sick friend, realized what you wanted to say, decided on a card instead, thought about what a nice gesture that would be, congratulated yourself on your thoughtfulness, and let it go at that? I hope I am not the only one here who has done that. I have even had a time later remembering whether I ever sent the card or not.

I believe in doing things like that. I even believe I am the kind of person who does things like that, but sometimes I do not do them. I just roll the idea around in my mind until I have sucked all the sweetness out of them and then I swallow them.

Friends, it is so easy to get beliefs mixed up with actions. Right now I know five or ten people who believe they love their families but who spend very little time with them. I know another twenty who believe in protecting the environment but you wouldn't know it from their lifestyle. I know about a hundred people who believe they are against violence but who would stand in line for the next Die Hard sequel coming out next year with Bruce Willis, me being one of them. I even know a few people who believe in democracy but who won't happen to vote in the upcoming election just like they didn't vote in the recent federal election.

It is a very peculiar thing, this vacuum between what we believe and what we actually do. The theological word for it is sin – missing the mark – which is both inevitable and forgivable but never tolerable for those who love God. When God is the mark we are missing, the vacuum is simply too painful to bear. It tears us up to say one thing and do another. It tears up our families, our friendships, our communities – when we say love and do indifference, or say right and do wrong, or say “I will go” and go nowhere at all. What we believe has no meaning apart from what we do about it. There is not a creed or a mission statement in the world that is worth one visit to a sick friend or one cup of water held out to someone who is longing for it.

A most wonderful book is entitled “Out Of Africa,” by Isak Dinesen, made also into a movie a number of years ago. One of those cases where the book is so good, I did not want to see the movie. Anyways, in the book Dinesen tells the story of a young Kikuyu boy named Kitau who appeared at her door in Nairobi one day to ask if he might work for her. She said yes and he turned out to be a fine servant, but after just three months he came to her again to ask her for a letter of recommendation to Sheikh Ali bin Salim, a Muslim in Mombasa. Upset at the thought of losing him, she offered to raise Kitau's pay, but he was firm about leaving.

He had decided he would become either a Christian or a Muslim, he explained, and his whole purpose in coming to live with her had been to see the ways and habits of Christians up close. Next he would go live for three months with Sheikh. Also to see how Muslim behaved and then he would make up his mind. Aghast, Dinesen, wrote, “I believe that even an Archbishop, when he had these facts laid out before him, would have said, or at least thought, as I said, “Good God, Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here.”

My brothers and sisters in Christ. God does not tell us ahead of time. Or, more to the point, God has been telling us all along – that there is no shortage of people who say, believe, or stand for all the right things. There have always been plenty of those in the world. What God is short of are people who will go where God calls them and do what God gives them to do – even, say, when it goes against their belief. It quote, Danish Lutheran philosopher Soren Kierkegaard of the 17th century, Jesus wants followers, not admirers. Whether we say yes or no to him is apparently less important to him than what we actually do. The important thing is what our lives say, and they are as easy for most people to read as the story of the Yes and No brothers. To tell which one you are, look in any mirror. What is moving? Your mouth or your feet? AMEN.