

Is That Your Final Answer?

September 28, 2008 | Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 21)

Lectionary citations

Exodus 17:1-7 with Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 'Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. 'Which of the two did what his father wanted?

While we were making apple butter yesterday, Ernie Jordan and I were briefly reflecting on today's Gospel. I stated that one way of living with the parable is, as a rule, to answer "No" to all requests. This gives you a chance to reflect on the request and change your answer later to "Yes" if it is something that you really ought to do. Ernie pointed out that when he was growing up, saying "No" to his father would have produced explosive results. My experience was the same. There was only one right answer to any request from my father, and that was "Yes, sir."

This is the challenging part of the parable. Although we have to concede that the son who actually went to the vineyard is the one who truly did his father's will, his initial "No" was disrespectful. According to Dr. John J. Pilch of Georgetown University, in the Middle East of today, as well as in Jesus' day, the idea of directly contradicting a parent would be dishonorable and disrespectful. After all, we have a commandment to "honor our father and mother." If

honor and respect are the highest values, then we would favor the respectful but disobedient son over the disrespectful but obedient son.

I have been thinking that our world today is more and more made up of two kinds of God's children, the "respectful but disobedient," and the "disrespectful and disobedient." We tend to focus on the disrespectful and disobedient, those who respect nobody, especially himself or herself and have no respect for God. They obey no instruction; they merely follow today's impulse or addiction. There are many of these people around and it is a challenge to heal them and bring them back into relationship with the community. Sometimes it is beyond human power. Only God can heal this kind of brokenness.

The rest of us frequently fall into the "respectful but disobedient" category. We fill our life with commitments, vows, covenants, agreements, and contracts, mostly entered into with good intentions, and honored mostly in the breach. We break our covenants so often that we support an entire legal system of lawyers, judges, and courts focusing entirely on broken contracts and agreements. Even when we take marriage vows before God in a church, we break those vows more often than not and turn to the courts to dissolve a marriage that we said would last "till death do us part." We learn the hard way that there no human agreement that cannot and will not be broken, no matter how many oaths we seal it with.

The reason? I feel the likely reason is that by removing God from our daily lives, we have no ultimate source of authority compels us to follow up our words with deeds. Since we no long fear God, we rely on lesser fears—shame, social rejection, embarrassment—to regulate our relationships. However, as time goes by, those fears seem less and less able to compel

obedience. Perhaps this is because our worst liars and cheaters often end up as celebrities. Even the fear of losing our material goods does not seem to compel us to live up to our agreements. For many, hiring a lawyer to weasel their way out seems a better option than living up to their word...the word that they said was their bond.

It is easy to be “respectful but disobedient” in our spiritual life also. God is our ultimate authority. Most of us feel that we should honor God and respond to him with respect. Jesus said in John’s Gospel, “If you love me, keep my commands.” When God command us to love him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, we feel that we need to say “Yes.” We may say “Yes” and forget the most important part of our response, “with God’s help.”

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard linked this parable to the old proverb, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” He pointed out that it is easy and highly self-destructive to start thinking and living as if saying “Yes” to the good is the same as changing our lives to conform to the good. He compares the “respectful but disobedient” person to someone walking backwards away from what is good, saying “Yes” the whole time.

It is the most dangerous thing for a person to go backwards with the help of good intentions, especially with the help of promises; for it is almost impossible to discover that one is really going backwards. When a person turns his back on someone and walks away, it is easy to see which way he is going. That is that! But when a person finds a way of turning his face towards him who he is walking away from, and in so doing walks backwards while appearing to greet the person, giving assurances again and again that he is coming, or incessantly saying “Here I am” – though he gets farther and farther away by walking backwards – then it is not so easy to become aware. And so it is with the one who, rich in good intentions and quick to promise, retreats backwards farther and farther from the good. With the help of intentions and promises, he maintains the honest impression that he is moving towards the good, yet all the while he moves farther and farther away from it. With every renewed intention and promise it seems

as if he is taking a new step forward but in reality he is only standing still, no, he is really taking another step backward.

The good intention, the "Yes," taken in vain, the unfulfilled promise leaves a residue of despair, of dejection. Beware! Good intention can very soon flare up again in more passionate declarations of intention, but only to leave behind even greater desperation. As an alcoholic constantly requires stronger and stronger drink, so the one who has fallen under the spell of good intentions and smooth-sounding declaration constantly requires more and more good intentions. And so he keeps himself from seeing that he is walking backwards.

Kierkegaard is basically saying that "talking the talk" is not the same as "walking the walk!"

When God calls us to ministry and mission, we have to expect that he will call us to do things that we are unable to do without his help. He calls us not to our areas of strength, to the abilities that we have nurtured through experience and training, but to use the Gifts of the Spirit that we have been given through our membership in the church, the Body of Christ. God is likely to call carpenters to teach children and teachers to build houses. When God calls us through the church to our own particular ministry and mission, we feel we need to say "Yes." We may say "yes" because our intentions are good, even though we doubt our ability to carry out the task. We say "yes," when a more realistic and honest response might be "no" or at best "maybe" or "not yet."

"Yes" is only a good answer to God if it is the beginning of the dialogue. The things God calls us to do are not trivial. They involve sacrifice and sometimes suffering. Saying "Yes" to God is the start of a journey that will last the rest of your life. The only way we can complete that journey is if we are willing to accept Jesus' help on every step of the way. When the disobedient son "changed his mind," the Greek word used is closely related to the word used later in the Gospel for "repentance." The tax collectors and sinners were saved because they believed and repented. When God calls, whether we initially say "Yes" or say "No," we still need to believe

and repent to be saved. If we believe and repent, the grace given by Christ will not only be reflected in our beautiful words, but also in our loving actions. Good intentions are fine, as long as the road we are paving is leading towards Christ and we are actually walking towards him. We need to make sure that we did not say “Yes” too quickly. We need to make sure that we are not now trying to escape the burden of our promise by walking backwards away from Christ into nothingness, smiling and waving, admiring the nice pavement of good intentions we are laying as we back nearer and nearer to the edge of the pit. Amen.

“Under the Spell of Good Intentions” by Soren Kierkegaard retrieved from <http://web.archive.org/web/20050403183933/http://www.brudershof.com/articles/UnderTheSpell.htm>

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