

10-1-2017 “Tough Stuff: Humility and Obedience” Matthew 21:28-32 Philippians 2:1-13
World Communion Sunday

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day when we who are Christian are asked to stop and realize that our world has more than 2.2 billion (2010 estimate) followers of Christ in it. The Christian church seems to be in decline in the United States, where it is legal and generally comfortable to practice our faith, but it is quite full of life in Third-World countries and in areas where it is dangerous to claim the Christian faith.

In today’s world, as we witness so many leaders and others who brag and puff themselves up to show how important they are, and who seem to delight in threatening other countries, humility is a rare commodity. Pope Francis seems to understand humility about as well as any contemporary public figure, astonishing the world when he became Pope and refused to live in a fancy papal palace, and declared his desire to drive himself around in his small car, and even made sure to return to his hotel that week to pay the bill for his room. He has continued to show deep understanding of Christ’s call to serve the poor and to reach out to those who are generally “under the radar” of those who consider themselves to be important in this world.

We have to keep in mind that in today’s lesson the Apostle Paul was writing to the early Christians who were living in Phillipi. Like Christians throughout the world back then and today, the folks found it very easy to forget about being humble and obedient as they tried to move forward as a church. As Paul said in the same letter, chapter 1, verse 15, “Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love...the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition.” In other words, just like today, the Christian church was a mixed bag.

To this “mixed bag” church, back then and here and now and throughout this world, Paul sends a word of caution, reminding us of our call to be imitators of Jesus Christ. What did Jesus do? He was the Son of God; he could have done anything! He could have moved mountains and even made us all nice people, but he didn’t! Instead, he took on the role of a servant, not trying to puff himself up, but instead associating with those who had no power to make him look great or to get him a pardon so he wouldn’t have to be crucified... Instead of calling up a powerful army and showing the world leaders who was the real BOSS, Jesus laid down his own life for our sakes, showing us that in the end forgiveness is more powerful than sin, and love more powerful than hatred. True power is found in giving up one’s self for the sake of another. (pause)

The way of the world can be so appealing! But only to a point. It may give you a rush to feel powerful and respected and important, but in the end, the big question will be: Did you follow your Savior? Was your life a YES to his life, or a No? Did you love God the best you could, and did you love your neighbor as much as you loved yourself? Or not?

In today’s gospel lesson, the religious authorities had gone up to Jesus and accosted him: “By whose authority are you doing these things?” (They were troubled by the authority and effectiveness of his healings and teachings.) Part of Jesus’ response was a parable, a story, about

a man who had two sons. One son was asked by the father to go work in the vineyard that day, and he said, basically, “No, Dad. I have other things to do: homework, then hang out with my friends, then watch TV. I don’t have time to help you.” But later, this son changed his mind, and ended up working in his father’s vineyard. The other son, when asked by his father to work, said, “Sure, Dad. I will.” But he didn’t. He ended up getting caught up in Facebook and other websites. The time evaporated, and he never went out to the vineyard. Jesus asked the religious folks, “Which of these two did the will of his father?”

The Bible, and our hearts also, would tell us that "lip-service," often filled-to-the-brim with good intentions, is all too often God's experience with humanity, as well as humanity's experience with itself. We are lax about our commitments to each other, and we tend to be even more so when it comes to our commitments to God.

Christians may hear this and say, "But I have been very careful not to promise God much. God knows how uncertain I am about God and this Christianity stuff. I am no hypocrite, for I make no promises to God. God doesn't expect much from me." So does God wait, like a careful, hopeful parent, that *some day* the child will respond?

Jesus told this parable while in the temple, just after the chief priests and elders had challenged his authority. So the initial intention of this parable was probably to tell the religious people that while they were offering all sorts of lip-service to God, they were failing to do God's will; and that the very people they criticized Jesus for associating with - the sinners, tax collectors, women of questionable backgrounds - were the "children" of God who were in the end doing the will of the father. Remember the words of the prophet Micah, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) Jesus accused the religious authorities of being hypocrites, of being so wrapped up in their own systems of rules and regulations that they left God out of their actions.

Even so, before we write this parable off as simply a castigation of the Jewish leaders for not recognizing in Jesus God's will, we'd better look at the parable a little more carefully.

Notice that neither son was all that good. Both insulted the father. One said no, the other said yes but did nothing. They went about their disobedience differently, but it was still disobedience to the father, which was a terrible thing in those days for a Mid-Eastern son to do. The first son finally did what his father had asked, but before he did, he publicly humiliated and insulted his father by disobeying a direct fatherly command with his verbal insolence. And of course, the second son insulted his father in two ways: he broke a promise to him, *and* he didn't do what his father asked him to do.

So that poor father had trouble with his sons! Neither was perfect. One finally ended up doing what the father had wanted them to do. But if your children treated you this way, you probably wouldn't find yourself bragging about it. (pause)

So here we are, sitting in church on a World Communion Sunday. It's not really a "braggable"

activity; you will be hard put to find anybody high-fiving you because you attended church today. But I hope we find ourselves - all of us, as God's sons and daughters - thinking about our world, considering seriously the pain of refugees and the people in Puerto Rico and the other victims of hurricanes and fires and earthquakes, reflecting also on the wealth and sometimes arrogance of those whose lives have not been affected, and especially remembering the call to ALL of us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. (Micah 6:8) That's what our Heavenly Father has asked of us. How are we doing in our response to what God has asked us to care about and to do?

As we share communion in a few minutes and then leave this sanctuary to go out into the various stresses and angers and challenges, perhaps even real hardships, that each of us faces, I pray that every one of us will chew on the call we have been given to imitate Jesus, who lived and died his life telling us that God loves us - even the sinners that we are! - and that God yearns for us to show love to God by loving the other kids of God in this room, in Winsted, in the United States, and all throughout the world. This is a tough call, but it is also a firm offer us to of LIFE.

Jesus humbled himself; God highly exalted him.

So we follow, we imitate, we stumble and fail and are forgiven and lifted up. Life lived this way is Christianity. Life lived in YES to God is no longer a rat race, where one fights the others to try to get the cheese, but instead a pilgrimage, an invitation to a living friendship with our Heavenly Father.

May it be so for each of us, and for the sake of this world. In Jesus' name, Amen.