

Brother Yes and Brother No
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
April 7, 2019 – PM Sermon
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Matthew 21:28-32

This parable may be simple, but it is not easy. This seems like a story that maybe makes an obvious point - one that we can quickly grasp and then move onto the next story. But this story is not as simple and as easy as it looks, and as I have wrestled with it I have found it challenging: challenging to me, and challenging to our way of understanding faith.

A Father has these two sons and he asks them to go work in the Vineyard. One son is crabby and obstinate. “I will not go!” he says. He’s kind of rude about it. “Take a hike, Pops!” And he walks away from his father muttering under his breath about what an unreasonable man he is. But later he changes his mind and goes and works anyway. The other son is a schmoozer, a real charmer. He says, “I will go, sir!” Note the ‘sir.’ In the Greek it’s Kyrie. You know what that word means, right? It means Lord. He doesn’t just say yes, he says yes with flair. “Yes Milord, I will go and do your bidding. And may I just say that you look particularly well this morning.” Unfortunately, after this fine speech, he doesn’t go. This son may be a charmer, but he’s no farmer. Let’s call them Brother Yes and Brother No. Brother No turns out to be the righteous one. Brother Yes turns out to be a charming disappointment.

How does this story challenge us and speak to us? I would like to mention four things, two challenges, one piece of advice and a word of hope. First of all this story is a challenge for us to watch the balance between our words and our actions. It challenges Christians who spend lots of time talking. Which means it’s a challenge for people like me. As a minister, I am something of a professional talker. This parable is a wakeup call for all ministers. I have been brother yes. There have been all sorts of weeks where I couldn’t possibly go visit that shut in or make that hospital call, because I was too busy putting the finishing touches on my sermon on compassion. There have been all sorts of weeks where I stayed at the office right through dinner do I could finish that sermon on the importance of spending time with your families. Lots of pretty words, and not so much action. I have been brother yes.

And so have you. Maybe you have spoken in sympathetic tones about poor Mrs Vandersma and the terrible thing she’s going through right now, but we never got around to doing anything for her. Maybe you have shaken our head at homelessness, but have never visited a shelter, let alone worked there. Maybe you have talked about the importance of evangelism and sharing the gospel with others but we have never done anything remotely evangelistic with our unbelieving neighbor. If you recognize any of these patterns in your own life, you’ve been brother yes too.

You know where brother yes really, really likes to hang out? At meetings. Brother Yes loves meetings. Brother Yes could be the patron saint of meetings. If the problem here is too much talk and not enough action, that is a clear and present danger at every single meeting. It is possible for a church to spend oodles of time preparing for ministry, without ever really getting around to doing ministry. Meetings are necessary of course, but the brother yes danger is there every single time. Brother Yes is alive and well in the church. He might be a pastor. He might be a committee chair. He might be you. This parable challenges all of us to take account of how much time we spend talking, and how much time we spend doing.

There is a second challenge in this parable. I think there is also a challenge to our view of faith, and what true faith looks like. It was probably on Reformation day or thereabouts in Miss Laansma's 3rd grade Bible class in the Kingston Christian School that I first heard the words "works righteousness". We were told the story of Martin Luther and the 95 theses and how he stood up to the church and started the Reformation. Miss Laansma told us how Luther realized that we were saved by grace and not by works! It's not about what we do! It's about what Jesus does through us. All my life since then I have learned to use those words pejoratively. And I'll bet you have too. You don't get saved by going to church twice every Sunday. That's works righteousness! You don't get saved by being a nice person, that's works righteousness! As Paul says in Ephesians 2: "you are saved by grace through faith, not by works so that no one can boast".

But now here comes the parable of the two brothers where Jesus points to the son who actually works as the one who has his Father's approval. The son who works, who acts, is the one who follows "the Way of Righteousness." This passage seems to put actions/ works/deeds on a pretty high pedestal. In our tradition we sometimes talk about faith and works as though they were separate things. Over here are my works, those are the things I do. Over here is my faith. It's made up of the things I believe, doctrines and things like that. It's also composed of my feelings about God. We talk about faith and works as if they were separate. In this parable Jesus messes with that kind of thinking. In this parable Jesus says, faith that matters, faith that pleases God, faith that lives is a faith that acts. We say I am saved by faith not works. Jesus says faith includes works.

When I was a youth leader, back in the mists of history, I had a little drill I used to do in church school classes to illustrate this point. I would give the kids a water balloon filled up with water and let them pass it around. I let them feel it, and get a sense of how full it was. Then I would say "how many of you think that this water balloon won't break if I drop it from over my head." Usually most of the people would raise their hand. Then I would stand on a chair and hold the balloon above my head. "How many of you still think the balloon won't break?" A few hands would go down, most stayed up. Finally I would say, "OK, of those who raised your hand, how many of you would be willing to lie on the floor right now underneath this water balloon while I dropped it on you." Usually I lost 75 to 80 percent of the faithful at this point. Usually there were only a couple of youth who were willing to put their faith into practice. Most of the young people had an intellectual belief about the water balloon, but they were not willing to act on that belief. They had words, but they were not quite willing to take the next step to action. The kind of faith Jesus is looking for in this parable is the faith that says, "yes sir I believe that the balloon won't break" and also lies down under the water balloon. Jesus ideal would be someone who was a combination of brother yes and brother no, someone who would talk like brother one AND who would work like brother two. But he's also saying that, given the choice, he'd rather have the doers than talkers.

Faith needs action. Faith may be rooted in belief and acceptance of God's grace, but faith needs action. That's a message found throughout the book of Matthew. In Matthew 7:21 Jesus complains about all the pious talk that seems to fill the world. All these people talking religious. They love to say Kyrie. But Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of heaven. But only the one who does the will of my father in heaven." Faith needs action. Then there is the parable of the wise and foolish builder - Matthew 7. The wise builder is the one who builds his house on the rock and not the sand. Who is the wise builder? Not the one who hears my words and memorizes them, not the one who hears my words and says them back

to me. It's the one who hears my words and puts them into practice. Faith needs action. Then of course there is Matthew 25 - when judgment day comes, who are the ones that the king calls good and faithful servants? They are the ones who clothed the naked, fed the hungry and visited those in prison - they were the ones with an active faith. By their fruit you shall know them. Faith needs action. Deeds are an essential expression of faith.

So those are the two challenges, now the word of advice. Actions are also a great tool for growing and reinforcing faith. When you are a young minister (which I'm not anymore, but I was once) you always have a few favorite old guys. In my first church I definitely had some men who I would call my favorite old guys, and one of those was Jack Kuipers. He was a math professor at Calvin. He was grizzled and quirky, and he was a great story teller. One of the stories he liked to tell was about how he and his Mother used to go back and forth about faith. Jack had a questioning nature. He always wanted to know, 'why?' He was forever asking, "How do we know? How can we be sure?" He did this with his catechism teachers and his Sunday school teachers. He would poke holes in the things they taught and they would get flustered and talk to his parents. This drove his Mother crazy, and she would say to him, "Jack, you just need to believe harder." Believe harder? His Mom would say that and he would wonder, "How does that work? How do you believe harder?" Is that like what Winnie the Pooh used to do when he wanted to think? Pooh used to go to his thoughtful spot and he would say "Think, think, think, think". Is that how it goes with belief? Do you go to your religious spot and say, "Believe, believe, believe, believe?" Probably not.

Perhaps the best way to deepen faith is to focus on doing something. Do the work of Christ. Just do it. Stop thinking about your doubts, stop thinking about your lack of passion, and go out and do the work of the Lord. Just go work in the vineyard. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, be a companion to the lonely, be a visitor for the prisoner, go on a youth trip to Guatemala, visit the bereaved or make a meal for your ailing neighbor. It can be a great way to restore your faith. Philip Yancey talks about this in his book, "Reaching for the Invisible God". He quotes John 7:17, a remarkable passage where Jesus makes a statement about how we find out the truth of his words. How do we become assured of Jesus' lordship? "Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own." "Note the sequence," says Yancey, "Choose to do God's will, and the confidence will later follow." Jesus says you can't wait for all your doubt, all your uncertainty and all your fear to evaporate before stepping out, sometimes you just act and trust that the Lord will show up and get you through.

Finally, there isn't just challenge and advice in this passage, there is also hope. There is hope for Brother Yes. He's a bit of a schmoozer. He's a hypocrite. It's hard to respect someone who talks pretty and behaves badly. But notice what Jesus says about Brother Yes. He doesn't say you will be thrown out of the family and you will be rejected. He says the tax collectors and the prostitutes will be heading into the Kingdom ahead of you. Brother Yes comes off badly, but he is still part of the procession into the Kingdom, even if he's at the back of the pack. There's also hope for Brother No. I find comfort in his character too. After all here is a person who says all the wrong things, who has all the wrong words, whose confession is flawed. But for one reason or another, in spite of his doubts and his denials, he does the work of the Kingdom. And despite his foul mouth and his bad attitude, he becomes part of the Kingdom procession.

I take comfort in these messy brothers and their complicated family life. This is a family with issues. Brother Yes and Brother No have issues. The Father's ideal for his family is a household full of sons and daughters who both say yes sir and then with glad and cheerful heart,

go out into the vineyard and do great work. But what he chooses and gathers is a family full of complications. What he chooses and gathers is not a perfect family; but it is a real family. Brother Yes and Brother No would fit in right here. They'd fit right in with our church family. We're complicated too. We are here surrounded by Brother Yes and Sister No. And Sister Maybe, and Uncle I Don't Care. That's what church families all look like. It makes for some interesting family dynamics. But there's one thing you can rely on: the Father is good, and he is strong, and his only begotten Son has a love that cannot fail. So I have hope that all of us - the yeses, the nos, and the maybes - will join the prostitutes and the tax collectors in that joyful procession up to the Father's throne.

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