

CHOOSING YOUR PAVEMENT

Sermon, September 25, 2011

Text: Matthew 21:23-32

The context of today's lectionary Gospel reading is that in the previous few days Jesus had just cleansed the temple following the Palm Sunday procession. Tension certainly was in the air when Jesus entered the temple in today's reading. Certain religious officials were plotting against him. They understandably viewed him as a threat. Jesus' teachings ran counter to their tradition. They had to do something to silence Him, so they decided to try to incriminate Him. They asked him a question, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Now, no matter how Jesus answered, He would have been in trouble. I suspect Jesus smiled as He countered with a question of His own, "Well, let me ask you a question. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" They didn't know how to answer. They began arguing among themselves, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'" On the other hand, they knew if they answered John's authority came from human origin, well, that might cause a riot, because many in the crowd thought John was a prophet sent by God. For them it was a no-win situation. No matter how they answered, THEY would be in trouble. They finally gave the lamest of all lame answers, and replied, "We do not know."

You know, they were shirking their duty with this answer; it was part of their job description to distinguish between false and true prophets. This is a deliberate assumption of ignorance among political and religious leaders for expediency's sake. This is the assumed ignorance of cowardice. They were not concerned with the question, "What is True?" BUT, "What is it safe to say?" This deliberate and feigned ignorance, this cowardly silence of expediency, this being more concerned with human reaction than with the real truth of a matter, is shameful ... and especially so for religious leaders. Jesus treated this reply with the bemused contempt it deserved. If they would not answer, He told them He would not answer their question, either.

Jesus then told a story about a man who had two sons. The father went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard." The son responded, "No." Later, though, this son changed his mind and went. Then the father went to his other son and said the same thing. This one answered, "O.K. Yes, sir!" but he never actually went to work. Then Jesus asked a simple, almost rhetorical, question: "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Then Jesus delivered His punch line, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him." That really was a punch line, and the religious authorities were the ones who were punched. I'm sure Jesus heard some gasps from His audience.

In a children's sermon a few years ago I told you of an old Japanese legend I had heard. The legend was of a man who died and went to heaven. Heaven was beautiful, full of lush gardens and glittering mansions. But then the man came to a large room lined with shelves. On those shelves were stacked piles and piles of ... human ears! A heavenly guide explained that these ears belonged to all the people on earth who listened each week to the word of God, but never acted on what they heard. Their worship never resulted in action. When these people died, therefore, only their ears ended up in heaven.

I think Jesus is dealing with a bunch of sanctified ears in this passage, and He is interested in the salvation of the whole person! He's telling them this story, this parable, in order to give them opportunity to repent and get on the stick while there's still time! It's so easy to mistake righteous attitudes and good intentions for true belief. We all know, though, if good intentions were enough, we'd all be saints and millionaires by now!

We all know people whose first response to anything is almost always "No!" but fortunately many of them have good hearts, and if they have time to reconsider and see the worth of a project, they will eventually pitch in and be the best workers or donors or supporters around. That was the first son. It was the second son who was problematic. He was not an indignant protester. Like many of us, he was a well intentioned procrastinator. Like many of us, he was nice, friendly, an agreeable person who will never argue with his father, never criticize, never give a father any sass, but when it comes to actually *doing* anything ... well, let's just say he fell a little bit short. He reminds me of the man who was laid off from his job and asked his employer for a letter of recommendation. His boss wrote a note that read: "To Whom It May Concern: If you can get John Smith to work for you, you will be extremely fortunate."

You've all heard the proverb, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." One meaning of this proverb is that well-intended acts can often have disastrous results, something many if not all of us know from at-times bitter

experience. Perhaps, though, the more common aspect of this proverb is that people often intend to do good things, but much of the time they do not make the effort to actually *do* those things *at all*. There are no actions to misinterpret and/or go awry! This common refrain is familiar to all of us to some degree or another: *"I kept meaning to (fill in the blank) but I never got around to it."* Merely intending to do good without actually doing it is, at best, of no value, and at worst, can lead to destructive and even evil ends.

Interestingly, the original proverb is, "Hell is paved with good intentions." There is no prefatory "the road to..." I find that an interesting contrast with heaven, where streets are paved with gold! Hell is that empty, value-less, unproductive, dark and ultimately destructive place that is "paved" with deeds left undone, promises left unkept, hopes left unfulfilled, commitments not carried out. There is a very real sense in which the way we live helps determine what kind of pavement will be under our feet for eternity!

However, as we normally associate *pavement* with *roadways* on which we travel toward a certain destination, the three words "the road to" got added to the proverb. We set out on a particular course of action with the best of motives, only to see things come terribly undone along the way, winding up where we had never planned to go. For example, we promise ourselves we are going to be kind to that person who seems so bent on making our life miserable. We will forgive our enemy, we will bless rather than curse those who curse us. We will do our best to see this person as a blessing ... a blessing in the neck, perhaps, but a blessing. But then comes the unexpected moment, the flash point, and our buttons get pushed and BOOM, we've failed again. So the road to hellish experience can be paved with good intentions. But I would venture to say that more often than not, our failure to fulfill good intentions is NOT not for lack of trying ... that's a double negative, I know; I use it to underscore that very often our failure is due to a lack of doing anything *at all*.

An unknown author put it this way:

He was going to be all that a man should be ... Tomorrow
No one would be better than he ... Tomorrow
Each morning he stacked up the letters he'd write ... Tomorrow
It was too bad indeed he was too busy to visit, but he promised to do it ... Tomorrow
The greatest of workers this man would have been ... Tomorrow
The world would have known him had he ever seen ... Tomorrow
But the fact is he died and faded from view,
And all that was left when living was through
Was a mountain of things he intended to do ... Tomorrow.

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Good intentions. How easy it is to put off doing things we ought to do. Some of us even put off things we want to do. We don't know why the second son never got to his chores. Procrastination? Something more appealing came along? Did his friends come and take him to the mall? We don't know, but we do know it's very much a part of human nature to make commitments we do not keep, to make promises that go unfulfilled, and all we leave behind is this ephemeral, worthless, empty mountain of good intentions.

The Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, NC, released a study of 21 executive officers who were terminated or forced to retire early from their companies. One of the universal character flaws all shared was a habit of not doing something they had promised. As motivational speaker Cavett Robert asserted, "Character is the ability to carry out a resolution long after the mood in which it was made has left you."

Are there promises you have made you have not kept? Are there good intentions you have not carried out? The sad truth of life is that we really don't have as much time as we think. Life is always too short. If we are going to be all God has called us to be, we need to begin now. If we are going to do the things God has called us to do, we need to do them now. Personally, both as a pastor and as a father, I wish Jesus had added a third son to his parable ... I would have liked to read about a son who listened to the Father's request, agreed to do it, and then did it! At once, and with enthusiasm! Yes, performance, not promise is what ultimately matters ... but given the choice, I think our Heavenly Father would prefer promise AND performance!

How about it? Let us be that third son. Let us respond to whatever our Heavenly Father is calling us to do, and let us do it at once with enthusiasm, while we have time ... and thus help pave our way to a better and more fulfilling today, tomorrow and forever.