

### Belief vs. Action

If there ever had been an investigation into the death of Jesus, this parable of the two brothers would probably have been presented as one of the things that got him killed. According to Matthew, Jesus told this story during the last week of his life in Jerusalem – after he rode on a donkey, in a march into the City from the east... joined by the poor, the infirm, women and children... the “sinners,” the excluded: tax-collectors, prostitutes ... all the “nobodies....” in a counter-demonstration to Pilate’s military parade coming into the City from the west... with all its symbols of military power and domination. Jesus’ procession was much like a Black Lives Matter demonstration!

*After* this public demonstration of opposition to the prevailing power structure, *after* he chased the merchants out of the Temple – challenging the Temple economic system that so negatively affected the poor; *after* all this, Jesus went *back* to the Temple to teach and that is where the chief priests and elders cornered him:

“Who gave you the authority to do all these things?

“Who do you think you are?”!

Instead of answering them directly, Jesus told them the story of the “Yes” & “No” Brothers.’

“Which brother,” asked Jesus, “did the will of the Father?” The answer was as easy for them as it is for us: of course, the brother who went into the vineyard and worked.

That wasn’t what ultimately got Jesus killed – what got Jesus killed was the second part, when he told the chief priests and elders *which brother they were!*

Jesus told the powers that be that *they said* all the right things, *believed* all the right things, *even stood for* all the right things – but would not do the right things God asked them to do. The last straw was the final line of today’s Gospel: “Powers that be – scribes & elders – you just don’t get it: you’re stuck in your ways ... John the Baptist couldn’t get through to you – I can’t get through to you! The tax collectors, “sinners,” prostitutes, outsiders are entering the kingdom of God before you!”

That was it... there was no turning back.

On the one hand, this is just one more story about hypocrisy, which has always been the number one charge leveled against religious people: that we say one thing and do another.

Some of us promise on Sunday that we will love each other and find a dozen ways to gossip, cheat or ignore each other on Monday. It's a serious charge against those who pretend goodness, wearing a fake fur of faith in God – in order to take advantage of others.

But for the most part, for those of us struggling to live a good life – that's not the real problem. Our conscience shocks us back into doing the right thing – or sincerely apologizing for having “blown it.”

I would guess a bigger problem for many of us is the unconscious ways we substitute our own beliefs about God for our obedience to God — as if it were enough to say: “I go, sir” without tensing a muscle to get out of our chairs.

Sometimes we have such good imaginations that we actually believe we've done things we really only thought about doing: I think about visiting a sick friend, I rehearse what I want to say. I then decide to send a card instead, thinking what a nice gesture that would be. I congratulate myself on my thoughtfulness and let it go at that. I have a hard time later remembering whether I ever sent the card or not. Has that ever happened to you? Sometimes I do it and sometimes... I don't.

Sisters and brothers, the bottom-line is that it's easy to get beliefs mixed-up with actions:

- You can love your family – but spend very little time with them;
- We believe strongly in protecting the environment – but drive a vehicle that gets 10 miles to the gallon;
- I am against violence – but am addicted to violent movies;
- He believes in the Constitution and democracy – but is not registered to vote.

The theological word for the vacuum between what we believe and what we actually do or don't do is “*sin*” – “missing the mark.” It tears us up to say one thing and do another. It tears-up our families, our friendships, our communities and even our Nation and world. Look at the mess our Nation is in at this moment – our beliefs in our American values, democracy, the Constitution, the common good, justice for all ... and actions which are divisive, demeaning, lying, cheating, etc., etc. tearing us apart.

What we believe has NO meaning apart from what we do about it. There is not a creed, mission statement, or constitution in the world that is worth one visit to a sick friend, one cup of water held out to someone longing for it, or waiting in line for hours in the midst of Covid-19 to vote. It's heart-warming to see our ballots coming back on our Parish Anti-Racism Statement... but the proof in the pudding will be when we ACT to end racism as individuals, families, parish and church.

Sisters and brothers, God has been telling us all along that there is NO shortage of people who say, believe and stand up for all the right things. There has already been plenty of those in the world. What God is short of – are people *who will go where God calls us and do what God gives us to do*. To quote Soren Kierkegaard: *“Jesus wants followers — not admirers!”*

Whether we say “yes” or “no” to Jesus, is 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” & “No” Brothers.’ To tell which one we are – look in any mirror: what is moving? Our mouth or our feet...?

Quite a challenge!

Amen!