

Matthew 21:23-32
Philippians 2:1-13

ACTING ON OUR BELIEFS

With the World Series right around the corner next month, I came upon this true story that speaks to the pinnacle of the baseball season, and it helps to get the sermon headed in the right direction. In 1965, the National League champions, the Los Angeles Dodgers, were playing the American League champions, the Minnesota Twins for the World Series championship. The starting pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers in the first game of the series was supposed to have been Sandy Koufax, who was a talented, left-handed pitcher. However, the opening day game fell on Yom Kippur, which is the Day of Atonement and one of the holiest days in the Jewish year; and, since Sandy Koufax was Jewish, he declined to pitch on that particular day. His employer, the Los Angeles Dodgers, pointed out that this was the first game of the 1965 World Series; couldn't he pitch and then go to a synagogue to worship. But, Sandy Koufax steadfastly refused to play baseball on Yom Kippur.

So, Don Drysdale pitched that first game in place of Koufax, and the Dodgers lost. Then, the Dodgers lost the second game of the series with Koufax on the mound. The Series was eventually tied 2-2 when Sandy Koufax put the Dodgers on his back and pitched a complete game shutout in Game 5. He followed that up with a three-hit shutout seventh game to clinch the World Series 4-3 for the Los Angeles Dodgers. By the way, besides throwing shutouts in games five and seven, Sandy Koufax's ERA (earned run average) was a remarkable .38.

It certainly helped that this story had a happy ending for Sandy Koufax and his Los Angeles Dodgers but, win or lose, don't you admire him for taking a stand and making his religious observance the top priority in his life above all else? Despite pressure from the Dodgers' organization and fans, surely we respect how Sandy Koufax's faith and his practice of his faith came before all else. His example reminds me of the old country preacher, who used to say, "There are two parts of the Bible. The first part is the believing it, and the second part is the behaving it." Sandy Koufax believed, and so, he behaved accordingly. He acted on his beliefs!

And that is precisely the point at which we jump out of the baseball story and into the biblical story found in Matthew's Gospel. It helps to know the context in which this passage is found. The day before, Jesus had made his triumphal entry into the Holy City, Jerusalem, seated atop a donkey. The disciples and a very large crowd enthusiastically welcomed Jesus and hailed him as "the Son of David, the One who comes in the name of the Lord," while the religious authorities looked on with indignation. To make matters worse, Jesus entered the temple and "cleaned house" by overturning the tables of the moneychangers and merchants. The chief priests and the scribes looked on with rising anger. Finally, the religious leaders had seen and heard enough!

When Jesus reappeared in the temple the next day (Monday of Holy Week), the chief priests and elders were waiting for him with a pointed question: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus knew that he was acting on his beliefs and carrying out the Father's will. But, Jesus also knew that these two groups of men - from both the priestly and nonpriestly aristocracy, with their privileged positions of heredity and wealth - were not seeking the truth so much as to entrap Jesus and discredit him before the people.

Therefore, Jesus countered their question with one of his own: "With regard to the baptism of John, did his message come from God or not?" The religious leaders were faced with a dilemma. If they said that John's baptism and authority came from God, Jesus would indict them for not accepting John's endorsement of him as the Messiah. On the other hand, if they denied that John's authority came from God, the people, who believed John was a true prophet, would be angry with them. The religious authorities thus passed on answering Jesus' question, and Jesus reciprocated by doing the same. Jesus' ultimate silence, along with his counter-question concerning John the Baptist, served as a testimony that Jesus' authority came from a source greater than these religious experts. By linking

himself with John, Jesus was implying that both his ministry and John's ministry had divine authority. And, as someone has said, we should note that Matthew intends for us to see the irony at work here: "Jesus has come, the long-awaited Messiah, the one to whom the Scriptures testify is here. And yet, those keepers of the Scriptures, those who claim to be awaiting the Messiah, resist him, examine him, and will ultimately seek to destroy him." (Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, 9/05, p. 54)

Then, Jesus filled in the silence that followed his refusal to answer the chief priests' and elders' trick question with the parable of the two sons. A certain father had two sons and plenty of work to do in the vineyard. He asked both sons to lend him a helping hand. The first one said, "No," then changed his mind, and went to work. The second son said, "Yes," but never showed up. Jesus asked the chief priests and elders, "Which one did the will of the father?" They gave the only answer possible – "The first."

Then Jesus applied the story to the religious leaders. He told them that they were nothing but a bunch of "Yes-men," who said one thing to God then did just the opposite. They honored God in public yet flat-out refused John's call for repentance and his announcement that the Messiah had come. On the other hand, the tax collectors and prostitutes, who had said "No" to God sometime in the past, had heard and heeded John's call to repentance; because they had acted on their beliefs and responded with obedience to John, and now Jesus, the tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of God before those religious leaders. Shocked silence must have followed Jesus' accusation.

I think this Gospel lesson speaks to us on several levels. It reminds us that, at any time, we can become like those chief priests and elders and miss out on what God is doing in our midst. Sometimes we can be so sure we are in the right, we too may fail to see that God is still at work in the present, our present, doing something new and different. We need to remember that the Spirit of God still shapes our world and leads us into new ways for a new time. We need to be open to the fact that Jesus may overturn our own tables, challenge our thinking, confront our self-centeredness, and move us into a new realm of thinking and doing that's quite different from the way it has always been.

And, when we get off course, when we say "Yes," to God but fail to follow through on our good intentions, when we sin whether by commission or omission, it helps me to remember that there is another Son present in the passage – not the two boys, not the father, who was himself a son, but Jesus Christ, who told this parable. Here is this other Son, who is remarkably different from us all for he agreed to do the will of his Father and then carried it out. Here is the only Son, who prayed to the Father, "Thy will be done," who not only meant it but, even more, did it. That's why we join with the Apostle Paul and the early church in affirming the hymn that "though Christ Jesus was in the form of God, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." And, somehow, within the vast mystery of the divine will, by his obedience on the cross, Jesus brings about our forgiveness and restores us to Almighty God.

That's where we would like to end the discussion on this Gospel passage but the lesson leads us to another place. As we respond to Jesus' obedience on the cross, we too are called to be obedient. What we believe about Jesus Christ must surely affect how we behave in the world. We are called to think and act like Jesus, to strive and match our actions with our words, to live in such a way that our faith expresses itself in faithful actions; it's a both...and, not an either...or. We believe, and then we act accordingly.

After the First World War, when Communism swept across Russia into the Baltic states and Estonia was inundated, a hundred Christian leaders in the city of Dorpat were arrested and sentenced to death. They remembered that on the last night of Jesus' earthly life he instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The men asked Pastor Hahn, their spiritual leader, to conduct such a final service for them. Fearlessly, he went to the Red commander and asked to minister to the condemned men. "If these people are crazy enough to want this, and if you are foolish enough to grant their request, we have no objection. But if you go into that prison you can never come out again. You must suffer their fate." Astounded, the pastor fled to his home, where he agonized in prayer to know what God expected of him. The decision came, and

he bade his wife farewell. Instinctively she knew it was not just a casual goodbye but a final one. She begged him not to leave her. Says Walter A. Maier, "The brave servant of God freed himself from her frantic grasp as gentle as he could and then, with the Spirit-granted majesty of a martyr, went directly to the prison, gave the hundred captives there the Lord's Supper, and was shot down with them." (He Will Abundantly Pardon, p. 186)

While our beliefs may never cause us to go to that extreme, it is true that in giving up our self, and not grasping for self, we discover our true Self. As we act on our beliefs, and behave in such an obedient fashion, we will truly find our deepest purpose, our greatest joy, and the peace of God that passes all understanding.

We have only to remember our Lord Jesus, who set aside the glory of heaven in order to become human, who humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death (even death on a cross), and in doing so, God has "highly exalted him and given him the name that is above every name." This third Son, who tells us the parable, is the One to believe in and to follow in his footsteps. When we act on our belief in him, when our faith and faithfulness are one and the same, then we, like our Lord Jesus, will bring glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Then, we will be glad that we both talked the talk and walked the walk. Amen.

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