

Wednesday in Lent II  
4 March 2015  
LTS Chapel, Tshwane, South Africa

Psalm 143  
Hymn: "To Thee, Omniscient Lord of All" -613 LSB

Matthew 21:28-32

"Father of mercies and God of all consolation, turn us from sins to trust in you alone. Give us hearts and minds made new that by your good Spirit we might confess our wretchedness and be turned with broken hearts to cling to your promise finding our refuge in the forgiveness purchased and won for us by the innocent life and atoning death of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord in whose name we pray. Amen.

There is an old saying in America that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. We are two months into the year 2015, and if you made any New Year's resolution they are likely long-forgotten. It is one thing to make good resolutions to be a better student, to take better care of your health, to be kinder and more gracious to those do you wrong; it is quite another matter to follow through those resolutions especially when the professor assigns so much work and the material seems difficult. It is one thing to think that you eat less and exercise more; it is another thing to say "no" to a second helping or force yourself to go the gym. It is a noble thought that you should bear with and forgive those who annoy and irritate but how hard it is to bridle your tongue, to guard yourself from falling back into the old patterns of resentment and harsh words.

Today's parable is a parable about good intentions. It is a parable of two contrasting sons. There is the son who when asked by his father to work in the vineyard and responds "I will not" but then changes his mind and goes. There is another son who when asked to go says "sure, I'll go" but does not. Which of these boys did the will of the father? The crowd to which Jesus is speaking gets it right as they give the obvious answer. It is the first one. The good intentions of the second son count for nothing for they did not lead to action. On the other hand, the son who originally rejected the call of his father to work in the vineyard has a change of mind. He contradicts himself in a salutary way. Even though he said in his rebellion that he would not go, he goes and labors in the field.

This is a parable about good intentions but much more. It is parable about good intentions with a twist. And that twist is repentance, a change of mind and a turning around. And this parable which so easily provokes a right answer from Jesus' hearers hits them and us right between the eyes. Jesus' words demonstrate that good intentions are not enough. In fact they can be and are the cloak we too often use to avoid the recognition of our own sin.

If we could interview the son who promised that he would go put his time into the vineyard, but did not, we can imagine the excuses he would give for his failed commitment. Something else came up. I was too busy. I was planning on going later when it was more convenient. Whatever rationalizations were offered did not matter. At the end of the day, he had not gone. The

opportunity to keep his promised had passed. It was too late. He had failed and all of his good intentions could not cover that fact.

Jesus' words hit hard for an audience that lives by good intentions. Religious people- and that is not only the scribes and Pharisees of ancient days but you and me- love good intentions. We want to be faithful to God's Word. We want to be pious. We have the good intention of loving the neighbor as ourselves. Good intentions get you nowhere with God. They leave you in your sin and they blind you to them.

Such blindness cannot recognize that those who have lived as if God did not matter with never a thought about appealing to good intentions –tax collectors and prostitutes- end up going into the kingdom first. Like the son who said “I will not go and work” but changed his mind and went, so these folks hear and heed the preaching of John the Baptist. They repent. Their minds are changed. Once God's enemies they are now His friends, reconciled, restored, and forgiven. They hear and believe the promise that God for the sake of the suffering and death of His Son, Jesus, justifies the ungodly.

This parable of our crucified and risen Lord now confronts you with two paths. Which will it be? Good intentions or repentance? Reliance on your good intentions which Luther calls justification by your thoughts or reliance on the blood and righteousness of the One who justifies the ungodly and calls the unrighteous holy and blessed? Reliance on good intentions or on Christ in repentance and faith?

Repent of your good intentions for they are soiled with unbelief and are hardly sufficient before the God from no secrets are hid. Trust in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world for His work is more than a good intention. It is sure and certain sealed with His blood and guaranteed by His resurrection from the dead. Amen.

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