

"RIGHT MUSIC WITH THE RIGHT WORDS"

INTRODUCTION Today's sermon thoughts are based on one of the less familiar parables of Jesus. As I was getting some thoughts down on paper yesterday afternoon, I was reminded of some lines of Christopher Morley.

"Out for my evening stroll
I discovered on 84th Street
A powerhouse - quietly humming to itself,
And though I lived nearby
I had never known it was there.
Some people are like that."

And I might add: some parables are like that, too. "powerhouses....quietly humming" to themselves. Mention the parables of Jesus and right away we think of the great ones: the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Mustard Seed. We tend to overlook some of the less familiar word pictures which are nonetheless an important part of the Gospel. I felt this way when I came across this parable not too long ago. "And though I lived near by, I had never known it was there."

DEVELOPMENT It's a timeless, true-to-life parable. It could have been written in 1980, NYC as well as 30 AD, Jerusalem. It was read earlier in the service; let's take a look at it again. Matthew 21: 28-31.

A certain father had two sons. We get the impression that they were as different as night and day. The first son was rebellious, rude, but also had a sense of conscience and responsibility. The second son was smooth, courteous, but he failed to keep his word, his commitments, his promises. To both sons, the father issued an order to perform certain tasks in the vineyard. The first son shook his head and said, "No. No way. I won't" - but, as the record puts it, "afterward he repented and went". Now the second son nodded his head in ready agreement, "Yes, sir..father...I go!" - but the parable says, "He did not go". Now Jesus asked, "which of the two did the will of his father?" And His listeners got the point of this parable and said, "The first" - the son who rebelled, but at length obeyed.

There's not much question but that Jesus was beaming a parable here in the direction of the Pharisees. Apparently, He felt they were like this second son: good intentions, good manners, public professions, but lacking in performance and practice. ~~Remember how He once came at this matter in other words, saying, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but He who does the will of My Father..."~~

He concluded this particular parable pointed at the Pharisees with the rather shocking suggestion that "the tax collectors and the harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you!" That was a heavy word to lay on them and it's no wonder then that not long after this parable was spoken it's recorded that "the chief priests and elders took counsel together in order to arrest Jesus and to kill Him".

ITS MEANING I'm sure that He upset them with His not so subtle suggestion that the discourteous and discredited person who repented and actually did something positive with his life counted for more in God's judgements than the person who was always "promising and professing" - but never did much more. He failed to get going and deliver on his promises.

Now with this, as with all of the parables of Jesus, we need to remember that He was illustrating a single truth and so we should be careful not to read more

into it than Jesus intended. Surely there is no rationalization for rudeness built into this parable, no glorification of the son's behaviour when he stamped his feet and shouted at this father, "No - I won't". ~~Who was it who said:~~

Rudeness is one of our main concerns of life together in a place like New York City. Remember that article in one of our papers some time back entitled, "In Street, Store and Subway, Rudeness Infects the Life of the City". And it was simply saying what so many of us have felt....the decline of courtesy and civility not only in city life, but also in homes and schools and hospitals and highways and courtrooms. The article quoted a psychologist, away from the city for a while and then returning to it and taking note of "how mad we New Yorkers really are." He commented and I quote him, "more and more people interpret rudeness and belligerence as a sign of Power."

Maybe so, but you can never justify rudeness by reference to the Man from Nazareth, who had some interesting things to say about people who were always pushing their way to the head of the table or the center of the stage, who celebrated the qualities of gentleness and kindness and thoughtfulness and humility. It was said of Him, "though He was reviled, He reviled not in return".

Rudeness is itself a way - and rudeness in the name of righteousness is to me as much a contradiction in terms as violence is in the name of peace. So, let us beware of magnifying the rudeness of the hero of this little parable. Rather, was not Jesus simply making it very clear that rudeness followed by repentance and obedience is infinitely better than the hypocrisy of correct phrases followed in turn by empty performance.

PARABLE FOR FAMILIES

We have here a parable that may have some things to say to families. Look at it closely.

Isn't this a pretty accurate portrait of two adolescent youth, searching for their identity and individuality and so rebelling against parental will. Now the first son rebelled in his words, but later chose to go and carry out his father's wish. While the second son was quick to give verbal consent or assent to the order, but failed to follow through and carry it out. His resentment was not as open but it was perhaps more dangerous. Both sons rebelled, but the first son's rebellion was healthier - for his ultimate choices and deeds, we gather, were sound.

I believe a preacher goes through several stages in his ministry of preaching about children and families. First, there is a time before he has children when he knows just about everything there is to know about raising children and proceeds to share it. I remember when I was in that stage, a long time ago. There is another time or stage when his children are growing up and he realizes that he doesn't know quite as much as he thought he once did and keeps still about it. And there is a third stage, later on, when his own children have grown up and he thinks that he may have a few helpful insights to share. I'm in the second stage...still learning...coping...and appreciate the advice of those in stage three. A friend in this third stage whose judgement I respect shared this with some of us recently.

He said that parents really do not need to get so up tight over their childrens' rebellious words and ways....their declarations of independence....as long as parents are steadily trying to equip their children to make some ultimate choices of worth, as persons in their own right.

We should not be so intent upon developing marionettes who always respond "yes, sir" or "no, sir" as we should in developing persons who are helped to discover God's purposes and potential for them. And something that Carlyle Marney wrote in one of his books. That North Carolina preacher - writer put it this way:

"Sometimes, someone who has the respect of the family needs to say to a father and a mother: get out of the way; get off the lid...quit being so fearful....parents are supposed to help children become adults, not pervert them from adulthood; in every normal home there ought to come a time when all that you have waited for and all that you have poured into these years of nursing and weaning and waiting ought to pay off. Your youngsters ought one day really to come of age. They ought to be adult and therefore enter into an adult relationship with parents that is normal and wholesome and happy".

I get the impression that the first son in the parable was much farther on his way to that kind of an adulthood than the second.

PERSONS Now, most of all, this is a parable for persons, especially for those who bear and take seriously the name of Christian. Jesus once said, "You are my disciples if you bear much fruit" - that is, if the performance bears some relationship to the profession, the deed to the declaration. It wasn't that Jesus looked for people who would say, "I will not" and then secretly performed the deeds of discipleship; it was that he looked for people who would say "I will" and then kept growing in deeds to go with their dedication, the right music to match the right words. The story holds a warning:

The best and the most convincing sermons are not those preached in any Church pulpit, though I gladly acknowledge my debt to some pulpit sermons that have been like thermostats for me. Rather, the greatest and most influential sermons are those preached in individual lives.

Hoover Roopert, working with Methodist youth caravans in Europe after World War II writes of a campfire service in a Polish Youth Camp. A young American War Veteran who was then a college student was speaking. Hoover Rupert says that he has never forgotten a phrase which that youth used in his talk that night. He said to the Polish young people, "Each one of you is the best Christian that someone knows."

Think about it as it applies to each of us. You - in school. You - in your office. You - in your business. You - in your home. You - in the hospital where you work. You - in your travels - the way you meet success, the way you meet sorrow, the way you meet others...the way you treat them. Remember, as you depart today....you are representing Christ to some one. "You are the best Christian that someone knows."

There was a poem that appeared a while back on the Editorial page of the Times. It was entitled, Remembered Teacher, and was obviously a tribute of the writer to a favorite teacher. It ended with these simple words:

"Not only what you taught, but what
You were....made miracles recur".

I like that! And this, to me, is the continuing glory of those who walk the Jesus way. This is the legacy of His steady followers across the years.

Fourteen of you have been confirmed and commissioned today to walk officially in His path, to help make those miracles occur and "recur" through love and kindness in the lives of others. Let these moments be "confirmed" deeply in your lives, and may the memory of this hour remain strong and vivid in your life...and help to keep you close to Him in everything you do.

LET US PRAY

"Though what I dream and what I do,
In my weak days are always two.

Help me - oppressed by things undone,
O Thou, whose deeds and dreams are one"

We pray that our dreams and deeds may be one, that we may put the right music with the right words in all we do, to the glory of thy name. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

BEFORE

"The Scripture Reading for today is taken
from the Gospel According to St. Matthew

Chapter 21. Verses 18 - 32,

and it is found on page 855 in the Bible in
the pews..."

(OVER)

RHONDA:

After announcing the page number, give people about 10 seconds to find it before starting to read...

The closing phrase is on the card, taped to the lectern, upper left....

...

The story holds a warning: even while professing Christ we may become drifters and castaways. The second Son is a token of low religion.

Today is too soon....the discipline of trying to live our faith too hard. So, though we have pledged our response to Christ, we do not go.

The first son points to a high religion.