

Ordinary Time 26A - October 1, 2017

Following Through

by Keith Wagner

Matthew 21:23-32

One time a woman went on a long weekend retreat with a group of women from her church. About halfway through the Monday session, she suddenly jumped to her feet and left the room. Concerned, a friend followed her to see what had caused her to leave the meeting so abruptly. She found her friend in the lobby talking on her cell phone.

"Is everything alright?" she asked. "Oh yes," the woman responded. "I didn't mean to cause you alarm." Feeling a bit sheepish, she added, "I suddenly remembered that Monday is trash day." Her friend seemed puzzled. "Trash day? Surely your husband is at home." "Yes," the woman said, "but it takes two of us to put out the trash. I can't carry it and he can't remember it."

There are times when we just don't follow through. We know what needs to be done but we get distracted, forget or pass the buck to someone else.

Jesus told the story of the two sons to illustrate the lack of commitment for those who were not being responsible. On the one hand, there was the first son who first said "no" but then later changed his mind. He represented the tax collectors and prostitutes who heard the words of John the Baptist and responded by following. Granted the first son was a little slow out of the gate, but eventually he came around.

On the other hand there was the second son who said, "yes" but never followed through. He represented those in the religious establishment who talked a good game, but their behavior didn't support their words. They appeared to look good but they rejected the words of John because their words didn't match their actions. They were good at telling others the rules, but didn't follow the rules themselves.

One time, a rabbi, master of the Talmud, taught some seminary students a valuable lesson. They were playing checkers when they should have been studying the Talmud. He told them not to be ashamed since they could always find time to study the law. He then proceeded to ask them if they knew the rules for the game of checkers. They said nothing, since they were

sure that the rabbi knew more than they did. So the rabbi told them the rules.

First, he said, "one must not make two moves at once." Second, "one may move only forward, not backward." Third, "when one has reached the last row, then they can move wherever they like."

The students concluded that (1) they should not clutter their lives with more than one move at a time. (2) they should always keep sight of their goal and move in that direction and (3) in the last row they would take on the role of a servant.

To make one move at a time means we are focused on the task at hand. Life throws many problems at us simultaneously. The only way to cope is to work on one challenge at a time.

We live in a world which puts many demands upon our time. We are pulled in many directions and therefore overwhelmed. We are a world of multi taskers who live our lives with conflicting goals. Texting when driving is an example. Each of those actions takes total concentration. We all know what can happen when we aren't focused. Our faith requires focus also. We are so distracted by all the chores of life the priority of soul enrichment gets pushed down the list.

Like the rabbi said, the only way to move forward is to concentrate on a single step at a time.

According to the second rule we can only move forward which means we cannot move backwards. We have to live in the present moment and not live in the past.

One Sunday afternoon I spent a couple of hours at the Antique Extravaganza at the Clark County Fairgrounds. The sale had only two hours to go and I was looking for bargains on trains. I was amazed at all the old relics I saw, things that were familiar to me during my childhood. There were Barbie dolls, records, Monopoly and Clue games, Fiesta Wear dishes my grandmother used to have and much more.

I stopped in a booth and struck up a conversation with the woman who told me she was downsizing and moving to Florida. I noticed there were five HO train cars on the table. I asked how much and she said, "Make me an offer." I offered her ten dollars and she hesitated. I said, "Look at it this way, you won't have to pack those up and carry them with you. "Sold," she said, "You got a deal." The woman was excited about her future in Florida. The more she was able to get rid of the easier it was for her to move forward.

The seminarians discerned that to reach the last row in checkers is to take on the role of a servant. Remember, Jesus had just said previously, "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." To say "yes" and follow through is to take the role of a servant. When we serve others our actions speak for themselves. Jesus didn't want his followers to be like the religious leaders of his day who were always boasting of their goodness. Their behavior did not reflect their claims. That's why he said that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom before them. They changed their behavior and followed.

One time there was a physically powerful but not so bright farmhand named Lem. He lived in a valley in Vermont. His mother resented him from the day he was born. She often ridiculed him with harsh and demeaning words. Even so, the boy served her until she died. Lem was the target of village jokes. But one night he came upon a huge dog killing some farmer's sheep. Using his bare hands, he strangled the dog to death. When morning came, the villagers discovered the dog was really a giant timber wolf. For the moment Lem then earned the admiration of the villagers. Later, an unwed girl falsely accused Lem of being the father of her child. Even though he was innocent, he married the girl so the child would have a father. Unfortunately, the mother died within a year, so Lem raised the little girl alone. After she had grown and married, her own baby became desperately ill, and Lem sold all his sheep to pay for the baby's medical care. Although Lem was confronted with meanness, discrimination and loneliness his whole life, he lived the life of a servant. (Dorothy Canfield Fisher)

Lem understood the rules of checkers. He was committed to the life of a servant. Intolerance from others did not hold him back. He kept living his life, giving of himself. Lem was a man who followed through.

Which son are you? Do you make commitments like the first son but take your time following through? Or are you like the second son, saying "Yes" but only telling people what they want to hear? In the end it's not what we say that matters, it's what we do.

During this life we are like moist clay: by our choices we can be molded into almost any shape. But death is like putting the clay into the fire. The clay might be a beautiful vase or a misshapen lump. Whatever form it has will last forever. Similarly with our souls: at the moment of death we will either be turned toward God or away from him.

When you think about, there are really only two moments that matter: the present moment and the final one. In the Hail Mary we say, "pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death."

At the last moment - the hour of our death - our eternal fate will be sealed.

The moment of our death is in God's hand, the moment we can control is now.

At some point the two moments will coincide: the hour of death will be now. There will be no tomorrow to plan for - or to postpone repentance. Begin now to allow God to mold you as you desire to be for eternity.

What counts is not the image that others perceive. What matters is our final state before God. And you can count on this: God's way is perfectly and mercifully fair. Amen.