

MOVING BEYOND DECISION

9/27/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA (*Livestreamed*)

Proper 21 (A): ~~Exodus 17:1-7~~; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Have you heard the riddle about the five frogs sitting on a log? Well, as they were sitting there, four of them decided to jump off. So, guess how many frogs were left on that log...all five of them; the four only “decided” to jump, they didn’t actually take any action.

I think about those frogs whenever I’m questioning my own commitment to something. For instance, I decided, during the Stay at Home orders, to dedicate the money I would normally be spending on eating out (which is way more than I like to admit!) to worthy causes. Fortunately, at that juncture, I didn’t just decide; I actually have been making a significant contribution to various non-profits each month.

One group I decided to support is the NAACP, and like all savvy organizations, as soon as I donated online, they added me to their email list. Last week, an announcement came through to boycott Instagram for a day, as a way to demand FaceBook take seriously their part in contributing to the perpetuation of racism, both by not blocking certain users, and by taking ad money from companies promoting white supremacy.

Well, I read notice, and “decided” to take part, but, in the end, I did nothing about it. I’m thinking about this, because this week marked the 39th annual International Day of Peace. And I wonder how many of us “decide” to do something about helping bring about peace in our world, then fail to take any action that might actually help?

The parable in this morning’s Gospel reading explores a similar idea. There are two sons; one promises his help, but doesn’t follow through; another son indicates he has no intention of helping, but, on second thought, decides the project worthy and shows up. Jesus asks, “Which of the two actually supported and aligned with the will of the parent?”

Of course, the correct answer is the one who followed through with help, because something simply contemplated, and something actually done are two different things. I was speaking with a newer friend about this recently—how we can sit and ruminate all day about what we think we ought to do, but until we actually do it, we’re not really living in integrity.

This parable, employed by Jesus, is just one of the sly tricks he plays on the chief priests and the elders, who are questioning his authority. They assume that by asking the right question, they’ll expose Jesus, along with what they think are misguided ways. Instead, Jesus responds with a question that could expose them. They decide to keep quiet, but in the meantime, Jesus throws out this parable to further illustrate his point.

In the midst of spinning these religious leaders onto their metaphorical heads, Jesus points out that it’s not the people who follow the law to letter who will be in God’s good graces. Those people may have not sinned according to the law, but in their hearts they have

not truly surrendered to God. They might have “decided” belief in God is a good thing, but they’ve done little to actually demonstrate their faith.

Instead, what God wants from us is to come with our flaws and imperfections, and be willing to live life as fully as possible, doing our best to love our neighbors. Of course, we’ll get it wrong; of course, we’ll make a mess of things, but in our willingness to repent—to try again and amend our ways—God meets us with arms wide open.

The International Day of Peace was established by the United Nations as a day devoted to strengthening the ideals of peace. This year’s theme is “Shaping Peace Together”, and people across the world are called to celebrate by spreading compassion, kindness and hope in the face of the pandemic. You’ll notice those words don’t simply invite us to contemplate peace, but use active verbs like “shaping” peace, and “spreading” compassion.

Embedded in that message is a foundation of hope—of believing we can make a difference together. The same theme is present in the Apostle Paul’s letter we read this morning. He seems to be filled with the Spirit and can’t wait to invite the Philippians onto God’s path of joy and hope. But it’s important to remember, as I’ve pointed out before, Paul wasn’t sitting in a serene garden contemplating these ideas; he was writing from prison, awaiting his own execution.

We might feel like that—like the confinement of the pandemic and the state of politics in our world leave us helpless...like there’s nothing we can do to contribute to peace. But Paul says, “I have good news for you! Christ is living within you! You can do these things, because ‘it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work’.”

So, this week, as we decide to do things, let’s not end up staying on the log with those silly frogs. Instead, let us commit to moving from decision to action, knowing even the smallest gesture of living out our faith does make a difference—even if it only plants a seed, because that seed is likely to germinate, take root later and flourish later. In other words—using a phrase I read in my daily devotions this week—let’s strive for “a faith that is real and not for show”!

-AMEN

Collect of the Day

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the

people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

- 1 Hear my teaching, O my people; *
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
- 2 I will open my mouth in a parable; *
I will declare the mysteries of ancient times.
- 3 That which we have heard and known,
and what our forefathers have told us, *
we will not hide from their children.
- 4 We will recount to generations to come
the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the LORD, *
and the wonderful works he has done.
- 12 He worked marvels in the sight of their forefathers, *
in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan.
- 13 He split open the sea and let them pass through; *
he made the waters stand up like walls.
- 14 He led them with a cloud by day, *
and all the night through with a glow of fire.
- 15 He split the hard rocks in the wilderness *
and gave them drink as from the great deep.
- 16 He brought streams out of the cliff, *
and the waters gushed out like rivers.

Philippians 2:1-13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being

born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.