

Expectations Transformed: Intention

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

“Your ultimate self-interest is in loving the other.”

John Foley, S.J.

What we have discovered in the last two weeks, and will discover again this morning, is that Jesus first defies, and then transforms expectations. And what we discovered in the last two weeks, and will discover again this morning, is that as those expectations are transformed, our invitation to live in grace, freed, liberated, will be transformed as well.

We see ourselves as unforgivable, and therefore find it difficult to forgive ourselves or others.

We see ourselves as unacceptable, and therefore find it difficult to accept ourselves or others.

Culture doesn't help, and oftentimes religion doesn't help either. And yet Jesus calls us to forgive incalculably, others and ourselves, and he calls us to accept immeasurably, others and ourselves. When we do, as a product of grace, the gift of God given freely and abundantly and without merit, our lives will be forever transformed and we will live in the world differently.

Which leads us to this morning. The topic becomes how we live out our faith in the world, and what motivates us and inspires us. Conventional wisdom would teach us two things, things that are, at the end of the day, “bad faith/bad religion.” The first is that we do good things in the world in order to earn God's favor, and get our heavenly ticket punched. “Works righteousness,” it is called. The second is that we don't need to do good things in the world because our eternal salvation is safely secured.

Both of these “bad faith/bad religion” approaches misunderstand God and magnify the weak spots in human nature. We do good things in the world, not to earn God’s favor. We couldn’t do anything to earn that period, and, anyway, grace already assures us that God’s love for us is deep and broad and high, freely given, and cannot be broken. Given that, however, our response can never be to do nothing. Rather, we respond in deep and profound gratitude to God’s deep and profound grace by sharing God’s love with a hurting and searching, broken and fearful world. As forgiven and accepted beloved children of God, how could we do anything less?

Which takes us to the next transformative parable from Matthew’s gospel. In simple terms, Jesus compares and contrasts. Fancy faith with nothing to show for it and earthly faith, searching faith, less-than-perfect and always searching and seeking faith, with lots to show for it. A father asks his two sons to work in his vineyard. One says he won’t and yet does. One says he will and yet does not. Who got it? Jesus asks.

It’s not a hard question. But in case the application wasn’t all that clear, Jesus connects the son-who-said-no-yet-worked with tax collectors and prostitutes, those at the farthest outreaches of social acceptability yet those who understand most clearly and completely what God is about, whose response to God’s grace is authentic and filled with integrity.

The one-who-said-yes-but-did-nothing, well, those are the religious authorities, the leadership, who talk a good game, put on a good show, have their doctrine down, their ritual just so, and who yet miss, and miss in a very big way, the larger purposes for Jesus’ ministry and the way God’s call claims a life in order to transform it.

The word I have attached to this is “intention,” and perhaps it is the right word and perhaps it is not. There are other words. Awareness. Mindfulness. Motivation. Practices. Habits. Good faith, that takes the good news that we are forgiven and accepted, and runs with it, to share that news with others and to make a difference in the world.

Think about it *some* – that’s theology. But never stop with it at the point of doctrine and ritual. Dale Bruner (*Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 2*, pages 373-

376) writes that for Matthew, “everything depends on really doing the Father’s will. It is not about two things, Bruner writes. It is not about “doctrinal fundamentalism,” simply believing the right thing. Nor is it about “emotional revivalism,” a pious, zealous response. No, faith is about an ethical, active response to God’s good news in the world, and Jesus is telling us that it’s more likely that the outcast and outsider gets that than the insiders.

Believing matters, but only takes root as faith in action. Bruner writes that this parable “warns all spiritually serious persons to beware lest our energies be spent almost entirely in spiritual correctness and we make life obedience secondary.” Eugene Boring writes that “God requires deeds rather than empty words.” (*New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Volume VIII)

This parable follows a confrontation whereby Jesus puts the religious authorities in their place. I’d like to put myself, and perhaps all of us, in the place of the two brothers. One said no and acted. One said yes and didn’t. Without getting too psychological, or wandering too far into the self-help section on Amazon.com, we wonder what is going on. What is going on with the two brothers?

What is going on with us? Our intentions are good, but we know what our mothers told us about good intentions. Whether getting off the couch, or taking that walk, or writing that letter, or reconnecting with that friend, or giving up this bad habit or that one, our intentions are good. We rationalize away why we do what we do or don’t do what we don’t. We talk a good game, but how well do we really play that game?

In terms of our faith, we leave the basics to others, prayer, Bible study, volunteering our time. And to be confessional, everything said about intentions is directed to the minister in the mirror as much as it is to anyone, whether it is in my own spiritual disciplines – prayer, especially – or taking my general outrage about how the world is and actually doing something about it.

The blogger Scott Young writes “We all have lousy habits. Things we’d like to do, or know we should, but just don’t seem to happen: exercise, diet, productivity or flossing longer than a week after the visit to the dentist.” “... Sustaining good behaviors,” Young writes, “... takes a lot of effort.” So he writes about habits. Making the effort to develop, to make a habit automatic. In my language, not his,

if you pray on a regular basis, even for a few minutes a day, or read the Bible, even a verse or two a day, or think about your money differently, or your time, faithful habits will develop. It will not take theological wizardry; it will take faithful intentionality.

We know Steven Covey's seven habits of highly effective people: being proactive, beginning with the end in mind; putting first things first, thinking win-win, seeking first to understand, then to be understood, synergizing, sharpening the saw.

What does this have to do with anything spiritual? It reminds all of us that whether teachers or neighbors or friends or committee members or ministers or business people or lawyers or farmers or whatever, that simply the intention of being effective – or in our case being faithful – won't cut it. To simply say I will be a good parent will not make you one. But most good parents I know would defer compliments about how good they are. They are simply good parents, living out their good intentions.

And most people I know – ministers or otherwise, and mostly otherwise – who demonstrate deep faith in action, would laugh at that concept if you acknowledged it. They have accepted the gift of grace, and rather than talking the good talk, they walk the good walk. They don't need to be anxious about earning God's grace; having received it, they share it with a world in need.

Jesus spent much of his public ministry fending off the criticisms of those who were like the second brother. They had their theology down, doctrinally tidy. They did all the things that on the surface looked like faithfulness. And yet Jesus knew their hearts, and deep down I believe they knew their own hearts as well. That is why Jesus' ministry generated such defensiveness from them. They knew.

And I believe deep in their hearts as well they knew that Jesus was right about those who lived like the first son, the prostitutes and the tax collectors. Their outrage directed towards them was false, in the end, because they knew their own hearts, nearly as well as Jesus did. And yet from their position of power, they could not act humbly, either toward their own lack of intentionality, or about the deep intentionality of others.

If you Google the word “intentionality,” you will find a lot of entries. If you Google the word “mindful,” or “mindfulness,” you will as well. My hunch is that the numbers of entries has increased as we have, as a culture, become more distracted by noise, the constant inputs of technology and our increased individualism.

A generation ago, Robert Bellah and others wrote about “Habits of the Heart,” that as we worked with greater focus and commitment to live morally upright lives, our culture’s life would be enhanced as well. As we worked with greater intention on our relationships, on getting involved, on being good citizens, our lives would improve and the lives of others would as well.

That is what drives Christian ethics, faith in action at its best. We do good, we act on our intentions, not to earn God’s favor, but to respond to God's love, and when we do, our hearts will be better and the world will be better. When you love yourself, accept yourself, forgive yourself, you can love others fully, accept others fully, forgive others fully.

Let’s try something for a moment. Let us seek to be mindful and intentional. Let us be silent, eyes closed ...Imagine... You are the first son. You have been asked to do something, to work, and you have said no. But something in you is calling you to action. Do you sense it? Take a moment to envision what that action looks like when you do it... What differences does it make in your own life... in the lives of those around you... Now open your eyes.

Know that you have been forgiven. Know that you have been accepted. And know you have been invited and empowered to do the work God has called and gifted you to do. The rest of up to you, to me, to us. And it will make all the difference. Amen.