

## The 'Yes, Sir' and 'Hell, No' Brothers



Matthew 21:28 (Jesus said), "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?"

Barbara Brown Taylor, the popular Episcopal writer, has declared that if there had been an inquest into Jesus' death, then this parable of the two brothers from today's Gospel would probably have been presented as evidence as to why Jesus was killed. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told this parable in Jerusalem during the last week of his life. According to Matthew, Jesus had stolen a donkey to ride into town,

whereupon he chased the moneychangers out of the temple with whips and overturned their tables. And shortly thereafter the chief priests and the elders cornered Jesus in the Temple and demanded to know by what authority he had done these things. Who, they wanted to know, did he think he was?

Instead of simply answering them, Jesus did what he had done before, he responded to their question with a question of his own, which the chief priests and the elders would not, or could not answer. So Jesus did not answer their question, and instead Jesus told them this parable, the parable I like to call the "Yes, Sir" and "Hell, No" brothers. In the story, a father asks two of his children to help him in the vineyard. The first, the "Hell, No" brother is quick to refuse his father's request, but later changed his mind and went to work in the fields. The "Yes, Sir" brother quickly told his father that he would go, but he never did. Which brother, Jesus asked his critics, did the will of his father?

The chief priests and elders quickly identified the first brother as the one who did the will of his father. It was *not* what either boy said that mattered, but what they finally did. Only that was not the part of the story that got Jesus killed. What got him killed was the second part, when he told the chief priests and elders which brother they were. They were the "Yes, Sir" brother, he told them; they were the one who said all the

right things, believed all the right things, stood up for all the right things, but who did not do the right things that God asked them to do.

They *thought* they were doing the right things, mind you, but they had gotten so attached to their own religious ideas about what those things were, that it was hard for them to accept any correction or to do anything else. First, John the Baptist came and then this Jesus suggesting that they trade in their old beliefs for a fresh experience of God, but they could not bring themselves to do so. They said "yes, sir" to God while they acted out a great big "hell, no" to God's will.

And thus Jesus declared that those people whom the chief priests and elders despised, the tax-collectors and even prostitutes, the collaborators with the Romans and the religiously unclean and the defiled, they were going into the kingdom of Heaven ahead of the chief priests and elders --- not instead of them, but just ahead of them. They were the people who may have said 'hell, no' at the beginning, but who changed their minds and went and did what their father asked, while those who said they would go, continued to mistake their own convictions for obedience to God.

On the one hand, this is just another story about hypocrisy, a charge often leveled at religious people, who say one thing and do another, promising they will love each other on

Sunday and then finding dozens and dozens of ways to shame, blame, or criticize self or others on Monday. It is a serious charge against those who pretend goodness, who wear a fake fur of faith in God in order to feel superior over other people who don't own furs of any kind; you know, those self-righteous religious people who think they are superior over others, we all know them.

But there is another group of religious people who are simply less aware of what they are doing, or not doing; who less consciously fail to do what their father has asked them, and perhaps they are more important for our consideration today. Right now, for instance, I know several people who believe they truly cherish their families, but who spend very little time with them. I know many who believe in protecting the environment, but drive gas-guzzlers or can't be bothered with recycling. I know other people who believe in the American way, or who complain about the government, but who are not even registered to vote.

It is a very peculiar thing, this vacuum between what we believe and what we actually do. The theological word for this is sin --- missing the mark --- which is both inevitable and forgivable, but never tolerable for those who love God. Such sin destroys families and congregations, it tears us up as we say one thing and do another, when we say love and do indifference

or disdain, or say right and do wrong, or say "I will go" and go nowhere at all. What we believe has no real meaning apart from what we do about it. There is no creed or mission statement or confession of faith in the world that is worth one act of kindness, one visit to a sick friend in need, or one cup of water held out to someone who is thirsting for it, or simple care for someone who is housebound and dying, or who is unemployed or homeless.

In Isak Dinesen's wonderful book, and later movie, *Out of Africa*, she tells the story of a young native boy who appeared at her door in Nairobi one day to ask if he might work for her. She said yes and he turned out to be an excellent servant, but after just three months he came to ask her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim businessman in Mombasa. Upset at the thought of losing him, Dinesen offered to raise his pay, but he was determined to leave.

He said that he had decided to become either a Christian or a Muslim, and that his whole purpose in coming to work for her was to see firsthand how Christians lived. Now he was going to work for a Muslim and see how they behaved and then would make up his mind. Aghast, Dinesen said "Good God . . . you might have told me that when you came here."

God does not tell us ahead of time. Or, perhaps more accurately, God has been telling us all along --- that there is

no shortage of people who say, believe, or stand for all the right things, but what God is really short of are people who will go where God calls them and do what God asks them to do --- even, say, when it goes *against* their beliefs. To quote Soren Kierkegaard, Jesus wants followers, not admirers, not "yes, men." Whether we say yes or no to him is apparently less important than what we actually do.

So what exactly are we doing? The life of a congregation is not measured by how grand they are, or how grand they think they are. It is not measured by how many people attend their services on Sunday or how glorious those services are. The life of a congregation is measured not by what they say or believe, but what they do, like care for the poor and downtrodden, like ministering to the widows and orphans, to the immigrant and undocumented, to the hungry and unemployed. The life of a congregation is measured by their care for the community, not just themselves. So many parishes I know spend so much of their time and money upon themselves, with fine choirs and excellent educational opportunities for their children, but spend little or no social outreach to the poor, or no struggle to correct injustices in their communities, or to heal the wounds of those suffering, like those suffering again this weekend from racial injustice in our country, where an unarmed black woman asleep in our own home, is awakened by intruders who did not clearly

identify themselves, acting on a warrant for a man who wasn't there at the time, who in fact was already in custody, who returned fire at her boyfriend defending the castle and shot her instead, six times, killing her --- and then with only one officer later charged with recklessly endangering her neighbors by firing his weapon so freely. But what about her? Say her name, Breonna Taylor. What about Breonna? Something is wrong here. Something is not right. And doing nothing about it is not acceptable according to our Gospel this morning, no matter what we say about it. What matters is that we act. Partisan neutrality does not justify moral neutrality.

In the words of the Prophet Micah, "O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The important thing is how we live out our lives --- and what do our actions or our inactions say about us and about what we hold dear, about whom we hold dear. Do we hold the life of Breonna Taylor dear? Silence is complicity in the pain and tragedy of her family and our community.

In the end, our lives and our faith is as easy for most people to read as the story of the "Hell, No" and "Yes, Sir" brothers. So what are we doing? What in God's name are we doing here? Amen.