

The Attitude of Moving On

Exodus 17: 1-7

Matthew 21: 23-32

Several years ago Vicki and I were in an antique store. This store featured “mid-century” items – that is things from the 1950s- 1970s. It was filled with stuff that we remembered from our own growing up time. There was a round free standing fire place and Florida orange. There was a bench seat from the main section of a Delta airliner in the 1960s with leg rests that could be raised – like a recliner! There was an album of Christmas music just like the one Vicki had bought the first year we were married. As I roamed through this store I felt comfortable. I knew the times and places where these items came from and they took me back to those times and places.

If I’m not careful I could be like the children of Israel – *oh the times back in Egypt were so good. Remember when we had to make bricks but weren’t given the right materials to make them? Or when we had to stand around and share our food? Oh – weren’t those the good ‘ole days. But now we are in the wilderness and about to starve of hunger and die of thirst! We need water! Why did we come out into the wilderness to die? Why did we follow Moses?*

The children of Israel complained. In reality we all find things to complain about.

We complain because – things are not what we think they should be;

We complain because the world has changed and we don’t like it;

We complain because our friends have moved and we feel left behind.

Moses was in the cross hairs of the complaints. He huffed and puffed. He tried to defend the Lord. But in the end it wasn’t satisfying to Moses or the people. I daresay this wasn’t very satisfying to the Lord.

Yet in the end – despite the complaints, the Lord provided.

In the gospel reading, Jesus confronted the religious authorities of the day. They wanted to know by what authority he was teaching, preaching and healing. And Jesus ends up questioning their authority. As I listen to this, I think – *yeah, you go Jesus. Show those old so and so-s just what it is!*

But then I stop. I realize that I’m part of the group that has become the religious authority. Jesus was at the outside of social circles and niceties. His followers were a motley mix of folks. I claim to be a follower. Maybe you do too. But we have gotten concerned with doing things – decently and in order.

Garcia Grindal teaches English – and writes about his faith in Christ. In a reflection about the parable of the two sons – both of whom say one thing and do another – he confesses:

*I’m not very fond of the religious establishment… But I’m part of it. Had I been there during the trial, the tormenting and the crucifixion of Jesus, I would have been the first to hammer in the nails. I’m a defender of the establishment, no matter how rotten I think it is.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

But the story of the 2 sons who both say they will do something and then do exactly the opposite upsets his sensibilities. As a Protestant Christian – maybe all Christians – his religious authority has taught that believing the right thing is the key to salvation, happiness and life. But Jesus’ story says just the opposite.

He goes on …*It hurts my Lutheran prejudices that it isn’t what we say but what we do that matters. … for Jesus the faith that doesn’t result in faithful action is mere talk.*

In our Presbyterian Church’s Book of Order there is a wonderful description of the “essential tenets of the Reformed faith.” The Book reads: *In these statements [Book of Confessions] the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do.*

Generations of Christians have been taught that our knowledge will drive our action. The basis for authority in the world is knowledge. How many of us have been told by a doctor to change a behavior – smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs, find ways to reduce stress, loose weight? And how many of us have carried through on a plan to achieve such a goal? At a primal level we know that just having a piece of information does not produce change.

Jesus knows this as well. Authority comes not from what we say. Knowledge comes from behavior.

You can behave yourself into new ways of thinking.

What does that mean for us as followers of Jesus Christ?

About a year ago on Facebook I posted a link to a blog written by Derek. His wife is the pastor of one of the churches I have served and I have admired his writing from afar. His blog post was titled:

*If you are rude and hateful, you are not following Jesus ….*

He quoted some verses from Hebrews:

Let us hold tightly to the hope that lives inside us… without wavering.

Let us think of ways to motivate one another… to acts of love and good works

Let us remember that God can be trusted to keep God’s promises

Cf Hebrews 10: 22-24

Another friend, Mark, an interim pastor who I met while serving in NC and one with whom I’ve done some continuing education responded. He wrote:

*I choose to demur from this assertion. Our faith is more than "Southern manners." This perspective is limited (both biblically and culturally) and does not take into account resistance to injustice and evil, and the racial and ethnic and personality differences among persons and groups. The article/study appears to reinforce a white, middle class /upper middle class take to Christian faith.*

This led to a back and forth between Derek and Mark in the space I created. I think it is neat to be able to create a space where people who don’t know each other but know you can come together. But I sensed that each of these more in common than not. The 3 of us are men of a certain age – and that brings with it all sorts of challenges – as well as all sort of privileges.

Mark is the kind of person who wants to expand on things. And he does this well. Derek was writing a blog. The idea is to get it out and make it short. Derek’s point was that bad behavior cannot be justified through faith in Christ.

But Mark wondered – who defines bad behavior in faith? Are there not some responses to situations and circumstances that might be matters of justice or truth that need a strong response that some could dismiss as grandstanding or showboating? Following Jesus, he wrote, is not to be equated with “being nice” or “not being rude or hateful” whatever that might mean.

Point taken. Yet we live in a world of snark – that is an attitude or expression of mocking irreverence and sarcasm. sometimes these are useful tools to steer us away from group think. The challenge is how to live in this balance between saying truth and beauty, justice and righteousness.

That’s exactly where the gospel reading points us to.

We can complain about a lot:

* Things aren’t the way they were.
* People don’t understand me.
* One person says one thing and does another.
* Someone else does one thing and says another.

Yet in the midst of our complaints, God provides. Water flows freely. Thirst is quenched. In the midst of our complaints, God provides, not because of what we do, but because of who God is.

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September 23, 2018

1. Says who? Matthew 21:23-32 by Gracia M. Grindal. [Christian Century. September 11, 2002](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2002-09/says-who) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)