

The Rev. Michael J. Bridge
Sermon- Matthew 21:28-32
Sunday, October 1, 2017

Words vs. Deeds

1. Some people are “sayers” while others are “doers.” Some people will sign up for everything, commit to all sorts of responsibilities, and then nothing gets done. Others, such as Bob Nicol, will just show up and do what needs done.
2. Have you ever been made promises by someone who didn’t follow through? We have all probably been on both sides of this to some degree. We have made well intentioned promises that we either forget about or can’t keep. And people do the same to us. How many of us, at this point, have given up on the “words” that the cable guy will be there tomorrow between noon and two? How many people actually believe that the contractor is going to come next week and get right to work- no breaks, no bidding on other jobs- on the project you need done?
3. We implicitly know that there is a difference between saying and doing. I can say that I will do anything. “I will paint the sanctuary next weekend.” That might be exciting to some, but it only matters if you come next weekend to either find me painting the sanctuary, or find that it has been painted.
4. We know the phrase, “Actions speak louder than words.” There is truth to this. I wouldn’t call it a universal truth, but it is true in many instances. Jesus was a man of words backed up with action. He said that he would destroy this temple (meaning his body) and raise it up again in three days. Three days after his destruction on the cross, the tomb was empty and Jesus was alive.
5. In our very short reading from Matthew today, Jesus poses the question about which of two sons did the will of their father: the one who said yes, but didn’t follow through, or the one who said no, but went and did it?
 - a. The chief priests and the elders of the temple, to whom this question was posed, responded that it was the one who went and did the work. They understood that obedience was about doing.
 - b. Jesus responds that the prostitutes and tax collectors will enter the kingdom of God before these chief priests and elders. Why? Because they were great at words. They could profess the faith. They could quote the law. They could promise to obey. Yet their actions didn’t match. They didn’t have faith in action; faith that moved them to obedience to the Lord.

To bear good fruit

1. Jesus is not teaching that you have to be good to go to heaven in this passage. He is teaching about the importance of bearing fruit. Jesus had just cursed the fig tree for failing to bear fruit- a symbol of the failure of Israel as a whole, and the temple staff in particular- to bear the fruit of the kingdom.
2. The temple should have been the most welcoming and inviting place to all people, not just Jews. There was an area for Gentiles so that they could come in and hear about the God of Israel and hopefully come to believe in him. When Jesus entered the temple, he found that this area had been converted into a place for business transactions to occur within the temple.

- a. Where is the fruit? When the place where the people are to go to hear about and experience God has been taken away in favor of a place to raise money, then it becomes clear that the fruit of the kingdom isn't growing there.
3. As Christians, our lives aren't simply about making an intellectual assent to propositions about God, although that is certainly part of it. Being a Christian is about being transformed by Christ and bearing the fruit of the kingdom through our obedience to his teachings. We have already received the gift of salvation through the blood of the cross. We have already been raised again in Christ through his resurrection. Now it is time for us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, to be conformed to the image and likeness of Christ, to bear the fruit of the kingdom.
4. The tax collectors and the prostitutes, Jesus told the chief priests and elders, would enter the kingdom of heaven first, because they had heard the preaching of John the Baptist about repenting and leading a new life for God; yet the religious leaders did not.
 - a. Here we see the words vs. actions comparison. The tax collectors and prostitutes were treated as the most notorious sinners in Israel. They would be the people who told God no for many years. Yet, upon hearing the call to repentance, they obeyed.
 - b. At the same time, the elders and chief priests were ones that said yes to God, yet continually refused to repent, to listen to the prophets, and to obey. They had words, but no actions. They were fruitless fig trees.
5. Jesus had cursed the fig tree because he saw that the temple bore no fruit. He said that it would never bear fruit again. That statement was far truer than it looks in that verse because the temple was destroyed 35-40 years later, and Israel was dispersed.
6. Of course, things passed from Israel/the Temple, to the Church, the Bride of Christ.
 - a. We will always be found righteous because Jesus has provided his righteousness for us, that he would present us back to himself in holiness and splendor (Ephesians 5).
 - b. It is precisely because of this that we should feel a sense of urgency to be people of action, bearers of fruit, and not like politicians who make promises but do nothing. God has gifted us, blessed us with the honor and the mission of bearing fruit in his kingdom. It is a privilege that we should delight in.