

Sermon for September 27th, 2020

Philippians 2: 1-13 and Matthew 21: 23-31

At the heart of the scripture passages today rests the intention and the follow through of doing a turning around and turning over. That is a turning around to the ways of the Lord and turning our lives over, by faith, to the leading of the Lord's Spirit. And it is a turning to, like Jesus, a full life of generosity & radical unselfishness.

We will hear this message again in the scriptures of our Affirmation of Faith from Philippians. Our attitudes are to be Christlike: humble, other-centered, faith-filled, thank-filled. Or as one commentator said about imitating Christ: *Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, comes to earth fully human, suffers and dies on a cross. You cannot get much more humble than that. In comparison to the priests who were too good for the poor and the prostitutes, Jesus ate among them and included them as part of his family—his brothers and sisters. Inclusion, that is an attitude to imitate.*

Speaking of imitating, theologian Fred Buechner tells a story about a trip he and his wife made with an interesting lodging atmosphere. The inn, in his words was cultured. Mozart's music was being piped through the surround sound speakers. Bookcases lined the walls with selections on art, literature, music, travel, and other cultural gems. The desk clerk, a man of small stature was sporting an oxford shirt and bowtie. With his horn-rimmed glasses, Buechner says, he looked more like a college professor than a hotel clerk. James Connor was his name and after registering, he picked up the luggage and led the guests up three flights of stairs to their room. They would later learn that indeed Mr. Conner had been the president of a small private college in Pennsylvania for 30 year and now, after retiring, he was owner and manager of the inn.

Researcher, writer, storyteller, and theologian that Buechner was, these men quickly became friends and through the years, more of Mr. Conner's story would unfold. While president of the college, he had the habit of disappearing, usually three times a year, for short periods of time. His destination was known only to his family and personal assistant. His mystery trips were generally close

to home, and the number one question asked when he returned, “Where did you work this time?”

His reputation as a man with a servant’s heart was well known, but his acts of kindness and help were always delivered with humility. One time he was a shoeshine man in a subway station. Another time, part of a garbage collecting crew. At a fire station he worked as a volunteer fireman. Growing up in a humble setting, these days of disappearing were, he said, meant to keep his feet on the ground, not letting the privileges of education, status, money drive distance between him and the very basics of living life. He always took a sum of money to leave with any

co-workers at his departure to continue unfinished projects. But more than money, he said, I took with me the names, faces, experiences, and needs of those with whom I worked side by side. I prayed for them, I stayed in contact with them and in big and small ways I tried to meet some of their needs. I never want to lose sight of generosity—that fruit of the spirit that can keep us focused our Creator who gives us life and our Lord who reminds us we are together in this thing called life.

In essence, his little treks were about doing a turning around and turning over when he felt self-centeredness and self-absorption creeping up on him.

Turning around and turning it over to Jesus, the apostle Paul reminds us will lead to the path of servanthood and humility already walked by our Lord. As stewards of all God has created, a truly generous life is not just about throwing money at a need. To live a full life of generosity and radical selflessness, asks of us to throw our whole selves into a life committed to take care of all God has given us.

That is the life Jesus lived. Unselfish. Generous. Making us the abundantly blessed receivers of forgiveness and salvation. The good news about returning thanksgiving to God with our financial resources, is what God can do with it. So true also with time, spiritual gifts, abilities, intellect. Sometimes we have to be reminded to turn around and turn to the source of all being, especially when we feel self-centeredness and self-absorption creeping in on us...as individuals and as the body of Christ.

And that's exactly what Jesus does in our Matthew story. It is no coincidence that it follows the story of Jesus turning over the tables of the temple money-changers. The chief priests are less than happy that Jesus is "messing with the temple's money and so they create a diversion by questioning Jesus' authority.

Jesus pardon the pun, turns the tables again, this time on the priests asking why they do not question the authority of John the Baptist. Jesus knows that they don't believe what John was preaching, but since this locust-eating, wilderness wanderer was popular with the people, the priests, covering their own backsides and public images, refused to call into question John's message. They were fence-riders. But Jesus is not. He pulls no punches in reminding them and us that the money so territorially managed is God's money, not the temple's; not theirs, not the money of the church, not ours.

Putting a strangle hold on money is not serving God, he says, it is self-serving. And he goes on to illustrate the behavior of the priests versus the people with the parable we heard of these two sons. Story told, Jesus asks, So, what do you think? Which of the two sons does as the father has desired and asked? The one who says he will not go work in his father's vineyard but changes his mind and goes later? Or the one who says, "Sure, I'll go," but never actually shows up?

Jesus knows that actions speak louder than words. We can talk all day long about caring for the least, the lost, the little" but in the end what matters is what we do. How we behave. The choices we make with God's money. With our God-given spiritual gifts and abilities. With God's gift of time and energy and the very gift of the breath that sustains us here, in God's kingdom, on earth and it will sustain us in heaven. What we do those things matters.

At some point, we will be called into accountability by God for what we say we have done for those who most need to know the love of God as opposed to what we actually have done. In modern lingo, we will be asked did you talk the talk, or did you walk the walk?

Oh, that that walk was easy. The desert times and places of our lives are real and overwhelming. We are getting a realistic dose of that right now. Exodus 17, our Call to Worship today, speaks of the wilderness-wandering Hebrews, whose lives were so centered on self at this point, they forgot the joys and benefits of thanking God, the very source of their rescue from Egyptian

slavery. Moses turns to God and says, “What I am going to do with these people?” God responds. “Strike the rock and life-giving water will flow.

It is God who delivers, not Moses, not our leaders, not our pastors, not me. We humans have good and bad days. We complain. We judge. We forget we are stewards of all that belongs to God, who has, with the greatest of generosity, allowed us to share in the blessings and trusted us to take care of them, in order that all may return thanks to God. On our own, it is hard to do a turn around and turn over. But turning away from the world’s desires and turning to God is a pretty good dance I would say.

The chief priests are pretty good about saying things. Using the power of their position, they try to keep everyone in order, with some self-exceptions from time to time. Even these holy men (and holy women) need to be reminded that pulling a “Jack Connor” from time to time is necessary.

We need to turn around and turn to Jesus. We need to meet Jesus face to face if we are serious about this call of following. Law dictates people’s behavior, but Jesus is looking for a change of heart, of attitude. The letter and the spirit of law are to complement one another causing us to do a radical turn away from selfishness and turn over our lives with thanksgiving to God. That is when we most fully live in and into the generosity of our Lord.

God does not have time for empty words or actions nor saying one thing and doing another. God wants our whole selves, our minds, hearts, souls, hands, and wants them lined up with what we do and who we are in the world. Jesus emptied himself. Radically unselfish. Full of generosity. Jesus emptied himself. Arms outstretched, embracing you and me and the whole world in love and grace and mercy.

He modeled how to turn around from the world’s hold and turn to the One who loved us even before we were formed. Jesus spent his life in the act of giving of himself and teaching others to do the same. What a gift God gave us.

The Spirit is still teaching us and calling us to use our God-given gifts to talk the talk and walk the walk that Jesus has already walked before us. I am in constant thanksgiving to God for this community of faith. You understand what it means to serve the Lord. So many of you are involved in ministry within and beyond Eastminster. You understand, like John Connors, that you were created

and filled with the refreshing water of life so that you could wander to different places to fill the spirits of others. You understand that your giftedness was never meant to be kept to yourself, but to be served to others.

Turning arounds and turning overs are not easy! But turning to Jesus, gives us the strength, the life-giving water, to imitate his life so full of generosity and radical unselfishness that through us, he can, in turn, continue offering the gift of ever-flowing salvation.

Imagine yourself to be a James or Janie Conner. How, when, and where would you unselfishly, without fuss or fame, serve the Lord by serving others? Imagine it, and then turn it over to the Spirit who will bring it to life!
Amen