***When Push Comes To Shove***

*a sermon by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno for October 1, 2023*

*based on Matthew 21: 23-32*

Robert Fulghum tells the following story that came right out of a newspaper.

A squad of firemen respond to a call of smoke rolling out of an upstairs apartment window.

They break down the front door. They dash upstairs. They find a man lying on a smoldering mattress. They pull him off it. They douse the flames. Then they ask the man the inevitable question: “How did this happen?”

And the man says, "I don't know. It was on fire when I lay down on it."

Now, that is the single most preposterous answer to a question I’ve ever heard in my life.

I begin with that story because I want to talk a little about the subject of responsibility this morning and for the four stewardship Sundays in this month. The question of responsibility is at the heart of the parable Jesus tells concerning two brothers. But I should set the ground under that parable first.

Jesus tells this story on the last week of his life. He is in Jerusalem and he has been busy. He has borrowed a donkey to ride into town. He has chased the money-changers out of the temple. And then, still in the temple, he does some teaching.

That is where the chief priests and elders have cornered him. They have a question for him. They want to know who has given him authority to do all these things. They want to know who he thinks he is.

Instead of answering them straight out, Jesus does something very characteristically Jesus. He counters by throwing it back on them: “What do you think?”

And then he tells them a story. He could have just given them an answer, but he knows that the answers people come up with themselves are the ones they will more likely believe.

It’s a simple story. A man has two sons. Today we might call one of them a strong-willed child. He is the kind of child with a bit of a chip on his shoulder. Something inside him likes to question authority just for questioning’s sake.

He likes to say the word, "No," a lot.

The other son is accustomed to saying, “Yes.” That is often the way in families. Different children find different ways to stake out their own unique territory and identity.

Well, the father asks them both to go out into the vineyard and do some work. The first says, “No way.” The other says, "Father, nothing would please me more than to go out and work in the field all morning long,

just for you.”

Two hours later: that polite, agreeable boy is still sitting on the sofa fooling with his phone, while the strong-willed one's conscience has gotten the best of him and now HE’S the one out there in the vineyard, sweating like crazy.

“Now, tell me,” says Jesus, “Which of these two pleased his father more?

The answer is easy. It wasn’t what either boy *said* that mattered. Nope, only what they *did*.

The glib, positive, agreeable son will say anything to please his father. He is one of those people who glides along on life's surfaces. He has good intentions, maybe, but at a deep level there is little to get him moving. He thinks in the short term. He only thinks to avoid any *initial* conflict with his father.

But he won't let himself even think about the conflict that's coming down the road due to his laziness. He has zero follow-thru.

The strong willed boy tends to be cranky. Something is always going on underneath the surface in him. You never know what he's going to do, because HE’S never sure what he's going to do.

Yes, but we know that whatever his father says to him, he takes very seriously. It works on him and on a deep level. He can’t forget it; he feels the necessity to eventually respond.

Maybe you saw this in your own family growing up.

Now, what got the religious authorities upset at Jesus wasn’t which kid gets the blame in the story, but the fact that Jesus identifies THEM with the boy who says, “Sure dad, whatever you say, and then does nothing.”

He knows that they are the kind of people who skate along on the surfaces of life. They say all the conventionally right things, believe all the conventional religious rubrics they are brought up to believe, stand for all the conventional values their faith represents, but will they **Do** the right things – the things that God will ask them to do when push comes to shove?

Of course, they THINK they are the preferred brand of “Christian.” I mean, they just take for granted that God prefers them because on the outside they dress formally and say the things form calls them to say. But that’s about all they commit to – surfaces.

First John the Baptist, and then Jesus ask these religious types to exchange those simplistic ideas and habits for a fresh experience of God, but they are not the least bit interested in doing that.

Experience of a living God isn’t something many of them are interested in. Respectability is what most of them are after and little more.

So Jesus tells them how they score with God. He says that the people they most despise in the world, the tax collectors and prostitutes, are going into God’s heaven ahead of them. Not instead of them, just ahead of them.

Tax collectors and prostitutes.

These are people who themselves may have said no to God at the beginning, but they at least are not phonies like the religious authorities.

The religious authorities refuse to follow Jesus because they continue to mistake their own shallow convictions about life and faith for obedience to God.

Jesus’s concern here is about a thing called hypocrisy, which has always been the #1 charge leveled against religious people since time’s beginnings -- those who say one thing but do another. And we are all guilty of it from time to time.

What’s more, this inclination is insidious. We are just plain unconscious about how this plays out in our lives, oftentimes. Why? Because we have the best intentions and sometimes we just fail to follow up those intentions with action.

I’m sure you know how this happens. You have every intention of visiting a sick friend in the hospital. You even rehearse what you plan to say to them, and you consider where to buy them flowers, but you don’t end up actually sending them.

Life gets away from you. You put it off a day and then a week goes by, and now they’re on the mend and home again, and you’ve missed the opportunity.

This kind of thing happens all the time. It’s not malicious. Not at all. We have the very best intentions, but our follow-thru is inadequate. Well, it’s just so easy to get our beliefs about ourselves mixed up with our actions.

This happens with casual friends and it also happens with our immediate families sometimes. We have every intention of being good moms, good husbands, but we let the tyranny of our work lives get in the way of doing what we know is the most important thing for us to do.

And finally, looking back, we find out an awful truth. That what we believe about ourselves (or God) has no meaning apart from what we end up doing about it.

Someone has said that there is not a creed or a mission statement in the world that is worth one visit to a sick friend or one cup of cold water held out to someone who is thirsty.

This is just common sense, but the religious authorities in Jesus day will have none of it, no more than many religious authorities today who think they understand God’s heart through and through and have zero regard at all for the poor, the people Jesus treasured the most.

Once later in life, Johnny Cash was asked by an interviewer why he insisted on wearing black. “I wore black because I liked it,” He said, “I still do, and wearing it still means something to me. It's still my symbol of rebellion -- against a stagnant status quo, against our hypocritical houses of God, against people whose minds are closed to others' ideas.”

Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote a play called, NO EXIT. I’ve never seen it on stage but I had to read it in college. It’s a play about Hell. Three souls, Joseph, Inez, and Estelle are locked in a well-furnished room with no windows, and they are behind a door that is forever locked.

The three are condemned to spend eternity together thinking about their lives on earth and why it is they ended up in Hell. They know that this is Hell, and they are surprised that there is no fire, no torture devices – just this somewhat comfortable room and the company of each other.

They are each very different, but all have one thing in common: they all think they have been placed here by mistake. Each thinks he or she is a pretty decent person. Each certainly has good intentions.

But there is another important factor; they each see weaknesses in the others that they miss in themselves.

At one point, Joseph speaks of the wonderful dreams he had had for his life. Inez interrupts him, saying, "It's what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one's made of."

Joseph protests: "I died too soon. I wasn't allowed time to accomplish anything good.”

Inez says, “One always dies too soon -- or too late. And yet one's whole life is complete at that moment with a line drawn neatly under it, ready for the summing up. You are your life and nothing else."

The religious authorities are so like Joseph in Sartre’s play. They have lofty ideas about themselves, the positions they hold and the trapping they wear are the things they depend upon to justify themselves to themselves.

"Tax collectors and prostitutes will enter heaven before you," says Jesus.

Why? Because they aren't hung up on themselves and their theology like the scribes and Pharisees. They have few hidden agendas. They live a much more transparent life. They, in fact, know themselves so much better than the hypocritical religious.

Today we’d say that they are very religious, but hardly spiritual at all.

They are like people who say, “I’d die for the Bible,” but they’ve never read it.” Kind of superficial.

The Rev. William Sloan Coffin was a hero of World War II. He ended up getting arrested a lot in the 1960s because he didn’t think the leaders of his country were living up to the depth of the sacrifice of the young men who died alongside him in the war he fought in.

He was criticized a lot for not being “patriotic.” He is remembered to have said, “I can only give two cheers for patriotism.

To say, “My country right or wrong,” is a bit like saying, ‘My grandmother, drunk or sober.’ It doesn’t advance any argument. The best patriots love their country enough to address its flaws.”

The scribes and Pharisees are a lot like those people.

You may not be old enough to remember the movie, *Out Of Africa* starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford from 1985. It was based on a book by Isak Dinesen.

There is a story in the book that bears on our subject matter today, but it didn’t make it into the film. It tells of a young Kikuyu boy named Kitau who appeared at Dinesen’s front door one day asking for a job.

Dinesen hires him but is surprised when after three months he asks her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim living in a nearby town.  Dinesen offers to raise Kitau’s pay in order to keep him, but money is of no interest to him.

Kitau explains that he had decided some time back to become either a Christian or a Muslim, and his purpose in working for Dinesen had been to see, up-close, the ways and habits of Christians.

He wanted to see if they were people who lived according to what they professed to believe, or not. Now, he says he intends to go and observe Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behave. Then, after a season with the Muslims, he would decide.

Aghast, Dineson writes the following in her journal. “I believe that even an archbishop, when he had these facts laid before him, would have said, or at least thought, ‘Good grief, Kitau, you might have at least told methat when you first came to work for me.’”

God does not tell us ahead of time. Or maybe God has been telling us all along that there is no shortage of people who say all the “right” things, believe all the “right” things, stand for all the “right” things. There have always been plenty of those kind of people in the world.

What God is short of are people who will go where God calls them, and do what God gives them to do – even when it goes against their personal code or habits.

Soren Kierkegaard put it best for me. He said, “God wants followers, not admirers.”

The important thing is what, in the end, our *lives* say. And, the fact is, our lives are pretty easy for most people to read. As easy as the story Jesus told of the two brothers – the one, full of B.S. who said “Sure dad, anything for you,” and the other who grumbled but came through in the clutch.

Amen.