

The Best of Intentions

A sermon by the Rev. Robert B. Edson, in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, September 28, 2008.

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interest of others. Philippians 2:4

Everyone sees Jesus different through his or her own point of view. It is said that an Irish person might identify with Jesus because he lived at home until he was 30, never married and was always telling stories. A Jewish person would identify with Jesus because he went into his father's business and his mother was sure that he was the son of God. The one I like best is that women identify with Jesus because he could feed a crowd at a moment's notice and kept trying to get his message across to a bunch of men who just didn't get it!

Among those who didn't get it were those skeptics who were always trying to get him to contradict himself. As he often does, Jesus uses a teaching story to illustrate his point. In his parable about two sons, one of them refuses his father's request to work in the vineyard, but later thinks better of it and does go to work. The other son with the best of intentions assures his father that he will work in the vineyard, but never does. The point is that the one who first refuses but has a change of heart is the one who ultimately does God's will rather than the one who doesn't deliver on his promise. The worse sinners who repent are better off than those who never follow through with their intentions.

How many times do we promise ourselves that we will lose a few pounds, give up smoking, cut down on drinking, or be more thoughtful as a parent or spouse and nothing comes of it? How many times do we borrow from someone and never return it? How often do we assure someone that we can be counted on and will be there for them until we realize it's not convenient? What really matters in this life is not what we *intend* to do but what we actually do. When I think of all that I was taught as a child, the one thing that stands out in my mind is about being conscientious and reliable in all things.

The noted hymnist and liturgist Percy Dearmer based his hymn today on John Bunyan's classic story, *Pilgrim's Progress*: in which he wrote:

*He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy follow the master.
There's no discouragement shall make him once relent,
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.*

Hymn 564 Hymnal 1982

I can't think of anything more valuable in teaching our children about responsibility than to follow through on their intentions. It is a mark of wholesome Christian character to be dependable and say what we mean and do what we say. Worse than good intentions are assurances and promises made with no intention of fulfilling them. The 19th Century English writer, William Blake, expressed it this way:

*The truth that's told with bad intent
Beats all the lies you can invent.*

It doesn't take long to learn who is reliable and who is not, who is sincere and who is not. In the business world, reputations are made or broken on whether or not services are delivered in a timely

manner. Business and professional reputations are lost when promises are broken, work is not completed, orders are not filled and goods and services are not delivered.

Most of us would like to leave behind some kind of legacy. We would like to be remembered for having a good reputation and for having accomplished something of significance. We don't need to have our name on a building or a monument erected in our memory, nor do we have to write a book or get a patent on an invention. More than anything, I would just rather be remembered for having been a reliable person who followed through on his intentions.

In the letter to the Philippians, we read how Christ completely emptied himself of all self interest. This is what is known as the kenotic Christ who released all his power and energy to give of himself as an example for us. He knew his mission and he accomplished what he set out to do. He delivered on his promise. It wasn't easy. His human side would have avoided suffering if possible, but he knew it was necessary and was willing to pay the price. He was faithful to God by accomplishing what he set out to do to bring redemption to the world. The longer I live, the more I realize the shortness and uncertainty of life and never want to miss the opportunity to do something of substance and meaning.

Think back on your own life. Who stands out in your mind? I remember those who were kind and selfless with no ulterior motive. I will never forget those who really listened when I needed it, those who really cared and were sympathetic and understanding and who went out of their way to be helpful. They may not even remember doing it, but I do. You don't forget things like that. They are a reminder of how much little things mean.

I've learned not to make up my mind too quickly about people. I've also learned that negative things I might hear about others aren't necessarily true. Would we not want others to do the same for us? The total value and worth of a person is much more than the sum of our experiences with them because we never exhaust the mystery of the human personality.

Rather than wanting to leave any kind of legacy in this life, think more about your relationship to God in the context of eternity. I suspect that most people never give much thought to it. Yet, our relationship with God, whatever form it takes, is for eternity. God doesn't forget about us when we die, rather, our spirit continues in a relationship with God. What form that relationship takes is a mystery, but I can't help but think it has something to do with who we are in this life. The destiny of our souls depends on the kind of person we choose to be and our relationship with God in the here and now. It is up to us.

So, if you haven't given much thought to long term planning for your soul, now is the time, this is the place and you are the one.