

Untitled sermon based on Matt. 7:21-28 and Rom. 1:16-17, 3:22b.-31, David Jahnke, 6/8/08, Prayer- Lord open our minds to hear your truth; open our hearts to receive your love, open our spirits to act upon your Word. Amen

The other day my son Dietrich walked up to me in the park and opened up his fist. And in his hand was a filthy coin. I said, "Wow you found a penny!" But I really wanted nothing to do with the sludge on the outside of it. But Dietrich was so happy to find it and really wanted to give it to me. So I received it and he went running off to look for some more treasures in the dirt.

When he gave it to me, the coin flipped over meant the sludge got me. But the other side of the coin was surprisingly clean, though worn and dusty. I could clearly see the image of Abraham Lincoln and the value of the coin. I tossed the coin back onto the ground

I think there are two sides to every one of us coins in the Kingdom of heaven. One side has quite a bit of dirt on it. God helps us see the dirt and we recognize that God alone is righteous. This side trusts that we are received by the father only because Jesus has found us and presented us clean. This side hopes that God won't toss us out like I did the coin.

The other side of the coin, while not completely clean, reveals the value of the coin itself. We see that we are worth a pretty penny. We see that the Father can use us to help redeem the world. We see the image of our true selves-- the image of goodness and light deep within us. We do not allow this to go to waste and can therefore move from hope to trust that God finds us valuable.

Later on in the service, we will enact a young man's entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Both sides of the coin will be on display. First we have an admission of the power of sin and the need for God's salvation followed by a profession of faith in Christ as Lord. But Jesus said to his followers, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

One of the students in our Tuesday Bible study rightly points out that even the demons *believed* that Jesus is the holy one of God. And yet demons are obviously opposed to the will of the Father. So at baptism, we not only profess what we believe, we also promise to be a faithful follower of Jesus, bearing his Word and showing his love.

The critical question for today's sermon is how we go about that work. The first thing which I have already alluded to is that we cannot be complacent in this work. Until Christ comes again to finally make things right, we are called to be like the worker ants in one of Seth's favorite stories, The Grasshopper and the Ants.

In this classic fable, the grasshopper goes on and on about how God will provide. And he wastes his days playing his fiddle and singing about how the world owes him a living. Meanwhile the ants are busy gathering up food for the coming winter. When winter hits,

the grasshopper is left out in the cold with nothing to eat and nowhere to go. More about this in a future children's sermon...

The point for today is that trusting in God does not absolve us of responsibility. We still have to be laborers of God's harvest or we may find ourselves out in the cold like the poor, lazy grasshopper.

But we have to be very careful in that work. For as soon as Jesus commands his followers to do the will of his Father in heaven, he tells a parable about people who were sure they had been doing God's will and in Jesus' name! But Jesus says that come that final harvest day, people will come to him and say, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and exercise many demons and do many deeds of power in your name?" Jesus' reply? "Get away from me you evil-doers!"

I am guessing that the community Matthew was writing to had a similar problem to the so-called super-apostles in Corinth. These apostles thought they were super-empowered and therefore, could do no wrong. They also thought they had special knowledge that others did not. They were easily deceived and became arrogant in Word and deed.

But Paul reminds that we have all fallen short of the glory of God and that works can never make us righteous. He says boasting is excluded; that we can never exalt ourselves over others because of what we accomplish in our work or because of our knowledge or morality or even our faith.

God tries to keep us humble as Presbyterian pastor and author Anne Lamott points out in one of her brilliant essays. She was feeling very uplifted by her congregation—proud of herself even after her Sunday sermon. But when she came home, she got into a big fight with her teenage son Sam. He had not brought his science binder home which he needed to do the report which was due the next day. He had had a month to do it and had promised that he was on top of everything. So, she writes:

I spluttered and fumed in the kitchen, and stormed down the hall to my own room, like a Cossack – or like my mother used to do when she headed down the hall to my older brother's room to bellow at him because he hadn't done his homework.

Sam shouted that I was turning out like my mother. He can always find the soft parts of me, where there is no turtle shell for protection. I slammed the door and started hitting it with my fist. Then I lay facedown on the bed.

She started thinking about her friend who would have told her to be kind and breathe and take a walk. So that's what she did, hiking up in the hills behind her house. When she got to the top, she sat down, closed her eyes and started to relax. From the book again:

There I sat on the hill, hands folded in my lap, eyes closed, and I started to relax. But then I made a cardinal mistake: I started to think about how holy I was acting, in the face of teenage contempt and shirking; how grownup, spiritually, emotionally. And this pleased me.

[But this] was bad.

It was like, “Batter up!” (Time for God to throw some curveballs or bean-balls.)

First the dogs arrived, three of them, from out of nowhere, barking at Lily and me until their owner stepped into the clearing and commanded them to be quiet. I smiled and waved, but closed my eyes so that she could see that I was in holiness mode. “It’s windy!” she cried. I opened my eyes. She had a waling stick, and looked like a shepherd, of bad dogs.

“What’s your dog’s name?” she shouted. I told her. “What kind of dog is she?” Where’d she get those ears? Here, Lily! Here, girl.” The woman sounded like someone from the shouting Loud family, on the old Saturday Night Live.

I hung my head and smiled to myself.

“I forgot your name,” she shouted. I told her, and she waved and headed down the hillside. I closed my eyes, breathed in calm, and grass; and then, the piece de resistance: the smell of dog poo filled my nose, sharp as ammonia, and foul.

God, I thought, self-righteously: This woman brings her barking dogs into this open space, and they crap all over everything, and she doesn’t clean up after them. I stood to move away, but when I looked down at the grass, there was nothing there. Then I looked at the sole of my shoe...

Rev. Lamott, in a holy place at a holy time...She is feeling so good about turning to God instead of resuming a fight but God has a little reminder that she is not so pure and that she has more work to do with her son at home.

The final thing that I want to say about kingdom work is derived from Paul’s insistence that we are only made righteous by trusting in God. This means we can only do God’s work through yielding first to God. And then yielding also in love and respect to what God calls us to work with-- whether we are working with physical materials, words, numbers, ideas or with people.

Eugene Peterson cites William Shakespeare as a perfect example of self-yielding. He notes that this poet from we have learned the most about the human condition is someone

about whom we know next to nothing. Shakespeare, rather than projecting his own ego, yielded to the Spirit of creativity and look at the fruits of his labor.

Who among us does not need to learn the power of yielding? Yielding to our spouses...to our children...to our elders' wisdom...to the new ideas of young people. Who does not need to be less willful and more willing? Conforming to our true image on the flip side of the coin means emptying ourselves of power over in order to be freed for creative service.

Rev. Lamott walked down the hill in the rain and mud took her shoes off before going in the house. One last excerpt from the book :

Sam was lying on the couch watching TV when I stepped in. I could tell he was still mad, because for a moment he did not look over. I closed the door behind me.

"I'm sorry I was awful," I said. "I don't know what's wrong with me sometimes. Everything gets to be too much, and I can't breathe."

He looked over in wounded silence. Then, as he actually saw me, there was an almost imperceptible shift in his face, as when he was a baby, first waking from a deep sleep: you could see his inside eyes open before he blinked awake, as if something inside him had floated to the surface from far away. "Look at you," he said, amused, parental. "You're all wet. Where you been? And where on earth are your shoes, dude?" Then he rubbed his forehead, wearily, but smiling, just like my mother used to do. (All excerpts from Plan B, pp. 23-30 Anne Lamott.)

This is humility lived out. The decision to yield to God's invitation to repent. And go to those whom we have tried to overpower. And when we go back home to our father, he will point out the dirt. We will say we are sorry and he will joyfully smile and welcome us back to our eternal home. To God be the glory and the power forever and ever. And the people of God say...Amen

