

I think I've been gone from Vermont long enough to tell occasionally a few stories on the people whom I served there, and from whom I learned so much. One of the women in the parish was particularly able, and wicked smart, as we might say around here. She had all the right words, and all the right practices. She was articulate, bright, well-read, and a leader. And I will admit that I loved it too that she was on the angel's side of every political, social, and church issue we faced, or at least my side. In contrast to her there was a man in the congregation who couldn't have been more dissimilar. He was coarse, and puffed up much of the time, and opinionated, and unable to listen. His tirades echoed the reactionary radio talk show hosts whom he admired. He was the first to speak up about how much money the church wasted. And so I respected the woman and barely tolerated the man.

At some point, and I can't tell you when, things began to change. The woman was always in favor of our programs and our mission projects, but never could find the time to get involved. She had all the right words, the best of intentions.

Then Hurricane Katrina happened, and to my surprise, the man led an effort with a neighboring Episcopal congregation to lead a group to help repair homes in New Orleans. They went four times! Maybe you can relate. Doesn't it get under your skin when people who use the wrong words do the right things? It messes up our neat categories into which we so carefully place people. But we can hear Jesus, perhaps even chuckling and saying "Oh, I'm so glad!"

That's what Jesus does to the religious establishment in Jerusalem in today's gospel. The scene in Matthew is from a college team's debate tournament. Verse by verse they battle until Jesus interrupts by telling this story. A father had two sons. The father asked both to work for him. The first said, "No," but later went anyway. The second said, "Yes," but never showed up. Jesus asks the temple leaders, "Which do you think did the will of the Father?" They give the only answer possible, "the first." Jesus then tells these religious leaders, "Don't you get it? You know God's way. You know the right words about God. You teach the right words every day. Can't you see the presence of God in my words and deeds? Yet, you fight me all the way. You play word games, and you won't consider that you, too, need to change. Look around.

Those who have cheated and lied and exploited others are being changed all around you and they, not you, are following me into the Kingdom of God."

Here's another story from the Green Mountain State, about a farmer from West Danville, who knew something about God, and the abundance of embrace that comes to us in the person and work of Jesus. The farmer and his wife had befriended a young teenager who lived down the road. There wasn't much support and love at the boy's own home, so the couple encouraged the high-schooler to spend time at the farm, to help with chores, and to feel accepted and affirmed.

The pastor had come by the farm for a glass of iced tea, and just then the young boy came up on the porch to tell the farmer of his plans to take the old rusted out pickup truck, and make a new bed for it from the hardwood stacked in the barn. He made sure to tell the farmer every part of his plan, and assured him it would get done in a couple of weeks, at the most. And with that he was off, away from earshot of the pastor and the farmer's visiting. That's when the farmer said, "He won't get the flatbed on that truck done. He just won't." Turned out the boy promised things all the time, things he intended to do because he cared for the couple so much, but they never got done.

Then the farmer said, “But I tend to remember him for his intentions, and not for what he accomplishes.” Wouldn’t you prefer to be remembered for your intentions, rather than your accomplishments?

When Jesus told the parable of the two sons, he had just entered Jerusalem. And the week that followed illustrates much about the intentions and actions of so many: we know the intentions of those who welcomed him with shouts of hosanna, and of his disciples who promised to be faithful to him even unto death. And we know of their subsequent actions.

And we know nothing about the intentions of others, but know their actions. Here, I think of people like Joseph of Ariamethea, who came out of the shadows at the crucifixion and took the body of Jesus and prepared it for burial, the patron saint of undertakers. We know nothing about his intentions, only that he was there when God needed him. We want to be like Joseph, but we are also like the crowd, just as we are like that eager teenage boy standing before a rusted pickup truck and promising to work wonders.

You’ve come here with some intentions, and maybe even some expectations, I’m sure. They might be about belief, or getting a little bit of good news for the living of your faith and your life. Maybe you want friendship, or even more than that, knowledge and truth. Today might be one of those days when this whole God-business and what we do here seems pointless. If that’s the case, don’t look for Jesus to swoop in to justify, or even to comfort your anxiety. Not at all.

Sometimes we have to answer “no” or “I don’t know”--like the first son did--and then go on as best we can hoping without hope that something true will break through. There’s no question that Jesus will challenge us to trust him. And, remember, that his intention always is for us to live fully and faithfully, which includes our whole lives, especially our questions.

In the end, I believe the God whom we worship cares less about our intentions, and more about our embrace of God’s intentions for us. If you need evidence of this look for yourself: in this sacrament of the Eucharist, to which you come week in and week out, as you receive this bounteous gift, see for yourself that God’s intentions and ours are united, perfectly and beautifully. Come, taste and see that the Lord is good.