

The 24 Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: November 19, 2017

Proper 28 Matthew 25: 14-30:

Forget the Excuses, Do What God Calls You to Do!

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN

Excuses, excuses! We all make excuses. Here is a list of excuses that schools have received from parents of absentee students: “Teacher, please excuse Mary for being absent. She was sick and I had her shot.” “My son is under a doctor’s care and should not take gym class today. Please execute him.”

“Please excuse my son’s tardiness. I forgot to wake him up and did not find him until I started making the beds.” “Please excuse Jennifer for missing school yesterday. We forgot to get the Sunday paper off the porch, and when we found it Monday, we thought it was Sunday.”

Excuses, Excuses! There is a wise saying: “He who really wants to do something finds a way; he who doesn’t finds an excuse.” We all know excuse

makers, people who could accomplish much in the world if they were as creative at their tasks as they are at making excuses for not tackling their tasks in the first place. The legendary baseball manager Casey Stengel said he could never stand to have what he called, a “pebble-picker” in his lineup. A pebble-picker is the short-stop who, when he misses a ground ball, looks around on the infield and always finds a pebble and holds it up as an excuse for his error. Jesus says, *“Then the one who had received one talent also came forward saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’”*

My sisters and brothers in Christ, Jesus teaches us a very important life lesson and that is simply this: We are responsible for how we live our lives. You and I are responsible for the choices we make. That’s not a popular viewpoint nowadays. We are a generation of excuse makers. Nevertheless, it is true. Life may be unkind to us or we may be incredibly blessed. But still, ultimately, we are responsible for how we respond to life’s ups and downs. Speaking of ups and downs, one of the first things you learn when you fly an airplane is the acronym, PIC, pilot in command. It literally means that you are totally responsible for what happens when you are piloting your aircraft. But what if poor maintenance causes the engine to fail? Well, it’s your fault. You should

check everything in your airplane during pre-flight inspection before takeoff.

What if a passenger hijacks you to Mexico? You're still responsible for the aircraft and your passengers. What if the weather turns bad and you have to land on a road or in a field? You will have to answer to the FAA for it. No matter what happens, you will shoulder the blame because you are the Pilot in Command. One of the first things you learn when you learn to fly is that you are completely responsible for your decisions and behaviors, no matter what the circumstances.

My point is this: We are all ultimately responsible for how we deal with our lives. Our parents are not responsible for the choices we make. Our spouse is not responsible for the choices we make. And the universe is not responsible for the choices we make. It's like a little girl who was once in a very bad mood. She took her frustration out on her younger brother. At first she just teased him. Eventually she punched him. Then she pulled his hair and kicked him in the shins. The boy could take it all and even dish back a few shots until the kicking began. That hurt! And he went crying to his mother, complaining about what his sister had done. The mother came to the little girl and said, "Mary, why did you let Satan put it into your heart to pull your brother's hair and kick his shins?" The little girl thought it over for a moment and then

answered, “Mom, maybe Satan did put it into my heart to pull Tommy’s hair but kicking him in the shins was my own idea.”

Ah yes, now Mary shouldn’t have kicked her brother in the shins, most of us will agree. But I appreciate the fact that she was willing to take responsibility for her actions. She didn’t hide behind Flip Wilson’s “the devil made me do it” defense. That, at least, is refreshing. In today’s gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus’ parable teaches us that we are responsible for how we live our lives. But there is a second thing we need to see. Circumstances rarely determine our destiny. Our character determines our destiny. Now this is not always true, but it is true often enough that we ought to take it seriously. Some people have a much more difficult time than the rest of us. We can sympathize with people from what may seem nearly hopeless family situations. We can particularly sympathize with those who have physical and mental disabilities. And we as a society ought to do far more than we are presently doing to help these individuals. They should not be made to suffer because of conditions over which they have no control. I hope everyone in the church agrees with me on that. On the other hand, it is evident that there are people who have overcome dire circumstances to contribute greatly to our world. We should be aware of them and give thanks for them. They inspire the rest of us.

I think one of the most amazing people in this world is the brilliant physicist Stephen Hawking. Go back with me to the year 1974. That year, Stephen Hawking made an extraordinary presentation at Oxford University before a panel of physicists. A member of that panel stood up, pounded his desk and declared that Hawking's presentation was nothing but "rubbish." Hawking remained unruffled. Hawking knew he was right.

As most of you know Hawking's excruciating condition was caused by a neurological disease known as ALS, otherwise known as Lou Gehrig's disease, which impaired him severely. But he wouldn't let his condition stop him. He went on to become the most celebrated physicist after Einstein. Like Einstein, Stephen Hawking suffered many setbacks during his life, even before being diagnosed with ALS. Nevertheless he courageously held on to his dreams. He could have easily quit. His physical condition made life tough, but he refused to allow self-pity to stop him. He believed firmly in his work. The presentation he made to that group of physicists more than 50 years ago opened the door to a better understanding of the universe. His body was weak but his spirit was strong. Because of his illness, Stephen could only communicate via a computerized translator. He refused, however, to let his physical condition dampen his intellectual ability. Hawking's story is proof that the human spirit can overcome severe setbacks.

We should have nothing but compassion for people who are not equipped to deal with their physical, emotional and psychological circumstances. We should never pass judgment on another human being. We do not know what makes some people more resilient than others or more determined. All we can say for certain is that we are called to live responsible lives and to take as role models those who have contributed to our world regardless of what they had to overcome to get there.

There are human beings who have overcome extraordinary circumstances--circumstances like poverty, physical and mental limitations, emotional problems, discrimination and oppression of all kinds as well as many other traumatic situations and yet have contributed significantly to their families, their community, their country and the world in general. And we give God thanks for them.

Jesus told a parable about a man who was given a gift and he buried it in the ground. Here is our challenge for the week: What gift has God given you that you have buried? You and I are responsible for our lives. Circumstances rarely determine our destiny. Our character determines our destiny. Are you a “pebble-picker,” as Casey Stengel put it? Are you constantly looking for excuses? Forget the excuses. So, why not resurrect your gift? Remember, it

takes more energy to come up with some kind of lame excuse, than what God is calling us to do? AMEN.