

“Doing His Will”

“If” is a very powerful word. With just two little letters, it can alter completely everything that comes after it. “If I only had ten million dollars, I could . . .” “If Michael Jordan hadn’t hit that buzzer-beating jump shot over Craig Ehlo . . .” “If I had bought Microsoft stock at its IPO for \$27.75 . . .”

“If” is the stuff that dreams are made of. “If” opens up an entire universe of alternative endings. Life would be so much better “If.” “If” I had been taller, thinner, smarter, wealthier, more sociable, more focused, better organized, less hairy . . . etc.

The problem is that “If” is all too often followed by “But.” “But I didn’t . . .” “But that never happened . . .” “But that’s not the way it was or is.”

It is not a requirement that “But” turn “If” into fantasy. If I hadn’t gone to the student leadership retreat in 1968, I would never have met my wife. If I had listened to Mr Dwyer, and if I never tried out for the lead in the Senior Class play, I would not have gotten the role of Captain Fisbee. “If” can also lead us to recognize how the events of the past have brought us to the present.

Today’s Second Lesson begins with these words from St. Paul: ***“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy . . .”*** As soon as we hear the word “If” we need to ask ourselves: Fantasy or reality? Is there ***“any encouragement in Christ?”*** Can we speak of ***“consolation from love?”*** Could there be something called ***“sharing in the Spirit?”*** Can we anywhere find ***“compassion and sympathy?”*** The answer to each and all of those questions is ***“Yes!”*** Alas, for most of us all too often that answer becomes a qualified, ***“Yes, but . . .”***

We know that all of those qualities and behaviors exist, so we know that much is true. As is the case with so much of our faith life, what is true is not always for us real. We can intellectually accept that God forgives; but

when we are oppressed by guilt that forgiveness is anything but real. We know it is true that the Holy Spirit is at work, but His work is for many of us remote, not real. If St. Paul's "Ifs" are prelude to fantasy, it is a fantasy we would very much desire to have become real in our lives.

Why is it that "*encouragement in Christ . . . consolation from love . . . sharing in the Spirit, [and] . . . compassion and sympathy*" so often elude us? I think St. Paul might answer us this way: "*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . .*" So, is it that our thinking is off? Tell us what to think, give us the truth, we'll accept it, and Bingo!

If it were a matter of mere information, we'd have been wallowing in encouragement, consolation, sharing, compassion and sympathy up to our eyeballs. We are in the information age; and we have come to realize that the more information we have the less we know. Moreover, we are in the age of the social network, which is ironically leaving us more and more isolated from one another. Oh, sure, we can know what each friend ate for breakfast, and what a dope Bobby was in class today. Would anyone really want to see pictures of my colonoscopy and endoscopy from a week ago Tuesday? "If" I were on Facebook, I could post them there. We have unimaginable information on one another, but do not get to reach into the heart.

In this business of taking on the mind of Christ, a word comes up that we often misconstrue. That word is "obey." Paul tells us that Jesus "*became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*" This is part of the Jesus mind-set we are to take on.

In the parable from today's Gospel, the issue seems to be obedience; yet the word never shows up. What does show up is this phrase: "*Which of the two did the will of his father?*" Isn't "doing the will of the Father" obedience? Well, let's see.

We tend to understand obedience as "*toeing the line,*" "*keeping your nose clean,*" and "*not messing up.*" All of which are behaviors that, in and of themselves are not bad, but we really do need more . . . no! We

need “other.” We do not need more instructions on how to behave. There are the Ten Commandments; and then there are the fifty volumes that make up the Code of Federal Regulations for the United States (that doesn’t even begin to touch the penal code . . . many, many volumes). And to top it all off, there are the unwritten rules that you didn’t learn as a child, but got spanked, sent to your room, were grounded, or went without supper for disobeying. Murphy, of course, arrives on the scene with rules to which we all go, “*Boy, ain’t that the truth.*” And then there are rules of engagement between male and female, which every female seems to know, and for which every male remains essentially clueless.

Do we need more instructions? NO! What we need is the mind of Christ. Let’s examine the parable in light of that.

The father came to first son and told him to go work in the vineyard. He says, “*No.*” The father then went to the second son with the same instruction, and is told, “*Right away, Dadoo.*” “***Which of the two did the will of his father?***” The answer, we know, does not lie in what they said, but in what they did. The first son wound up going into the vineyard to work. The second son lied through his teeth and went off to the pool hall. Or did he lie? When he said, “***I go, sir,***” did he have every intention of acting on that pledge? We have no way to know. Just as we have no way to know what changed the mind of the first son from refusal to positive action.

But I think we are safe ground if we recognize that self-centeredness was at work in both of them. Number One son may have had a hot date for that afternoon; didn’t want to pass up a few hours with the lovely lass, so he said, “*No.*” Number Two son may have suddenly been overwhelmed by acute torpidity, which kept him out of the vineyard (didn’t want the help to catch what he had). One of them, however, wound up assessing his way of thinking and took on what the Father wanted him to do.

Now, commentator after Biblical scholar read this parable of Jesus and make the inference (apparently warranted in light of the context of its telling) that Number One son stands for the outcasts, tax collectors, and

lowlifes that Jesus liked to hang around, and Number Two son represents the Pharisees, Sadducees, and their ilk. To the question (which Jesus does not ask): “*Who does each of these sons represent?*” I think the answer is “*Me.*”

This is, like it or not, our condition: Our reaction to the will of God is more often than not clouded by our self-centeredness. We want to do God’s will, but . . . we . . . don’t do it. Not just, we don’t do it; we don’t want to do it. God often asks of us inconvenient, untenable activities. God often sets before us scandalous options. God invites us to go places we don’t want to go, to be with people we’d rather avoid, and to do things we have little or no interest in pursuing. We don’t want to do it. It is as simple as that. We don’t want to do it.

What, then, is the Mind of Christ? Paul tells us that Jesus rose up over self-centeredness: He “*did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited . . .*” or, as Eugene Peterson so aptly paraphrases: “*He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human!*”

Pay attention to that last emphasis (Peterson did put the word in italics for us): he became *human*. Why is it that we don’t want to do God’s will? We often try to excuse our behaviors and misbehavior with the phrase, “*After all, I’m only human.*” Nope. The problem is always that we are not human enough, human like Jesus, in full communion and agreement with His Father, and doing His will. For Jesus it was never a matter of asking, “*What do I want to do?*” In the ongoing dance that is the Trinity, the oneness of mind is absolute, and in His humanity, Jesus gave none of that away.

This then is what it means to take on the mind of Christ and do God’s will. Instead of asking, “*What do I want?*” start to ask, “*What does God want of me?*” I know. That sounds simplistic; try it anyhow. Instead of looking for ways promote your self-interests (come on, don’t take on that

says you never would do anything like that; you know you do), ask someone else, “*What can I do for you?*” (Be ready to catch that person when he or she faints because somebody asked if they could help. You may find that some will even back up a few steps wondering what’s wrong with you). Or don’t ask; just start doing something nice for another: Wash your neighbor’s car. Rake the leaves in the yard at the corner. Wheel somebody’s trash cans back from the curb or street. Telephone someone you know is shut-in, or better yet, pay that person a visit (maybe tough in this pandemic era).

Now, I do not want this to seem like do-good-ism; like we’re scoring “brownie points” with God. These suggestions are just priming the pump; positioning yourself to be ready to be used by God in powerful ways. You don’t think God can use you in powerful ways? Remember Jonah last Sunday? So get ready. Train yourself. Do non-selfish things, so when the time comes you can say, “*I’m ready, coach. Put me in!*”

And He will . . . there’s no “Ifs” about it.

Amen.