

Children

Good morning, boys and girls. I brought this broom to remind us of what we call household chores. Hopefully all of us help around the house with sweeping, clearing the table, filling the dishwasher, etc. Jesus told about two brothers who were asked by their father to do some chores. One of them said, "Sure," but he never got around to doing them. The other put up a big fuss, but later he realized that he really ought to help around the house and went ahead and did what he was supposed to do. Which one of them did what his father wanted? That's right, the one who fussed, but still did his chores. Doing our chores around home is one way we show our parents that we love them and appreciate what they do for us. Of course, if we can do what we are suppose to do with a cheerful spirit, that is even better. Why don't we try to be better than either brother? Let's do what we are supposed to do to show our parents how much we love them and to keep the family operating well, and let's do it with a happy face. That way we give our parents two gifts--the deed and a pleasant attitude as well.

There is a wonderful story about a group of military leaders who succeeded in building a super computer that was able to solve any problem large or small, strategic or tactical. These military leaders assembled in front of the new machine for a demonstration. The engineer conducting the demonstration instructed these officers to feed a difficult tactical problem into it. The military leaders proceeded to describe a hypothetical situation to the computer and then asked the pivotal question: attack or retreat? This enormous super computer hummed away for an hour and then printed out its one-word answer . . . YES.

The generals looked at each other, somewhat stupefied. Finally one of them submits a second request to the computer: YES WHAT? Instantly the computer responded: YES, SIR.

The Pharisees, like these generals, were accustomed to people saying "Yes, sir" to them. They were the religious authorities. They were used to being treated as such. But there was a new teacher in town, a teacher who was threatening their authority. The Pharisees were alarmed. They feared Jesus' popularity, his ability to heal and to perform miracles. In their eyes, Jesus was preaching heresy and leading people away from the religious traditions that defined the Jews. The Pharisees wanted to expose him as a fraud. Today, out there, all you hear about is politics, right? And we'll hear about politics for the next 39 days until the election.

Each candidate running for whatever office wants to convince you that you should believe in their position, support their causes, but most of all, believe that he or she can do the job better than anyone else. It's your job to look at the evidence, the facts as you know them or have experienced them, look into their job history, examine their character, and come to a conclusion whether or not you want to believe not just in what that person says, but in whether that person is being authentic, is telling you the truth about what they really think, will really follow through with what they say.

Is that candidate saying what they think you want to hear? Or can you trust that the candidate is authentically trustworthy? Politics makes this kind of discernment very hard. Very hard indeed.

And it makes "belief" more complicated than just simply taking words at face value.

A good rule of thumb? Listen to words. But look at actions. Is there "fruit" Is there proof in the pudding? Is there follow through? Is there consistency? Of works and of character? Or is it just a politics of rhetoric?

What do we believe?

Well, belief itself is not so simple.

There are two types of belief here that we are talking about. On one hand, do you believe what he or she is telling you? Flat out. Do you believe what is coming out of the mouth of a given candidate is truth? Or true for you?

On the other hand, do you believe in that candidate? Or in other words, do you trust him or her –to do a good job, to follow through, to support what is promised, to fulfill the role if elected, to be the person he or she projected during the campaign.

Whether or not to believe is based in both head and heart, in facts, but also in trust. Only when you put your trust in someone can you say, you truly come on board, and invest yourself heart and soul in supporting and following that candidate.

Faith is like that too, especially within the church, especially when it's about faith in Jesus.

True faith. We talk about it. We say we have it. We hold it as the basis as Christians for our lives and churches.

The reality is that our churches are filled with agnostics, people who believe with their minds, but have neglected to believe in their hearts, to trust their lives and souls to Jesus' person and authority.

In our scripture for today, Jesus calls his colleagues, the priests and elders, on this very issue. As the priests and elders get "political" and try to determine what the "right" or helpful answer might be, the one they think Jesus wants to hear, they undermine their own authority as those in the "know." And they reveal the weakness of their faith.

Jesus knows, they do not believe in Him. In fact, they don't know much what they believe, because they are spending their time trying to search for the convenient, political, advantageous answer –an answer that will keep their own authority intact and allow them to undermine Jesus' ministry.

There is an old Japanese legend that tells of a man who died and went to heaven. Heaven was beautiful full of lush gardens and glittering mansions. But then the man came to a room lined with shelves. On the shelves were stacked piles of human ears! A heavenly guide explained that these ears belonged to all the people on earth who listened each week to the word of God, but never acted on God's teachings. Their worship never resulted in action. When these people died, therefore, only their ears ended up in heaven. Jesus is dealing with a bunch of "earless" religious folk in this passage, and it would be to our benefit to listen in on the conversation. It's so easy to mistake self-righteous attitudes for true belief in Jesus as Savior. Any one of us can be guilty of it. This passage packs a powerful message.

I. God's Grace is Shocking.

Imagine splashing hot pink paint over a black-and-white picture. Imagine tearing open the windows of a darkened room and letting the sun blaze through. Now imagine showing people a whole new view of God that breaks down the boundaries of everything they think to be true. Jesus is talking about what types of people are acceptable to stand before a holy, holy, holy God. And he passes over the religious professionals in favor of the worst of sinners. Has he lost his mind? Or could it be that our self-righteousness doesn't earn us many points with God? Maybe God isn't a Cosmic Scorekeeper, tallying up our moral hits and misses. Maybe we don't have to earn God's love. Because maybe God loves us even when we fail.

These sound like simplistic ideas, but to those of us who cling to our self-righteousness, they are enough to shake us down to our very soul. God's arms are open to everyone, from every race and nation and tribe and tongue, from every walk of life, from every circumstance. We're really missing something extraordinary when we put boundaries on God's grace.

Dr. James Dobson tells about his daughter, Danae. Danae was an attractive baby and toddler. Dobson noted that people paid special attention to her, gave her candy, oohed and ahed over her, mainly because she was so cute. But when Danae was fifteen months old, she fell and injured her mouth. Suddenly, her mouth took on a lopsided shape that considerably altered her appearance. Overnight, the world seemed to treat Danae differently. Strangers no longer oohed and ahed over her. They stopped making a fuss over her. Admiring glances changed to awkward stares. Danae had not changed in the least. She was still a vivacious, smart, loving toddler. But the community no longer embraced and encouraged her because of her outward appearance. (2)

In the Pharisees minds, God only had regard for that which was perfect, unblemished, without defect. They had reduced God to the level of human beings who turn their back on a little girl because of a crooked mouth. The Pharisees had no concept of God's grace God's love for all God's children, even those who were tarnished with sin.

Bonnie St. John Deane in her book, *Succeeding Sane*, tells about the movie, *Hoop Dreams*, a true story. For four years a documentary film team takes cameras and follows the lives of two talented young basketball players from one of the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago. The young man with more natural talent gets a high school scholarship, a posh summer job, and a coach from hell. However, the constant badgering, pressure, and demeaning style of the coach slowly destroys any fun the kid ever felt in the game. Once the desire to play begins to crumble, he begins to sabotage his own success. He becomes more vulnerable to injuries, his grades drop, and he acts up socially with drugs and sex. His cry for help goes unheard.

Meanwhile, the kid with less talent gets less help and less pressure. He is left to struggle in worse schools combating pressure from gangs. He has to want to play or it isn't going to happen. Despite his father being jailed for drugs and his mother being on and off welfare, he works to stay in school, to stay on the team.

Finally he wins a college scholarship and goes on to play ball better than ever. By the end of the story, it is clear that he is a happier, healthier person more likely to be successful with or without basketball. (3)

The Pharisees were like the demanding coach badgering, pressuring, demeaning. They wanted perfection. Jesus knew that is not the way to bring hurting people into the kingdom of God. He did it with love and acceptance. He did it by living out God's amazing, startling, absurd grace.

II. This Is How We Are to Live Our Lives.

We are to be grace-filled. We are to reach out to little girls with crooked smiles and old people with trembling hands. We are to value all people as worthy of acceptance, and we are to introduce them to the One who died in their behalf, and in our behalf.

Millions of people around the world have been inspired by Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*. Maxine Raines, director of a ministry to the homeless in Knoxville, Tennessee, knew her homeless friends couldn't afford to buy a movie ticket. So she brought the movie theater to them. With the support of her church and private donors, Raines erected an outdoor theater under a downtown bridge where homeless people like to congregate. Then she showed the film to a group of more than 400 street people.

Many were moved to tears; dozens prayed to receive Christ that night. Raines' commented, "I want them to be able to see that somebody cared enough for them to give His life for them . . . They tell me they are hopeless, nobody can help and I say to them, 'I know One who can.'" (4)

Nobody is hopeless. Nobody is beyond help. Why? Because there is a man with nails in his hands who says, "You're so important I gave my life for you." "Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.' "

Maxine Raines took the kingdom of God to a group of people who are usually overlooked, discounted, and left out. And many of them responded with repentance and faith. No one is left out of God's grace.

III. No One Is Excluded from the Kingdom of God, Not Even a Pharisee.

He said that the tax collectors and the prostitutes would enter the kingdom before they did. The tax collectors and the prostitutes didn't carry the baggage of religiosity. Even veterans All they knew is that they were forgiven and washed clean. Jesus simply widened the boundaries of the kingdom. Of course, the Pharisees were part of it, but so were the people that the Pharisees would never accept as equals. The Pharisees wanted a kingdom that was reserved for themselves and their kind. Jesus wanted a kingdom that was big enough for everybody.

In 1962, James Meredith made civil rights history as the first Black student ever to enroll at the University of Mississippi. This simple act inspired vicious race riots in the surrounding town, but Meredith didn't let it intimidate him. Four years later, in a bid to inspire Black citizens in the South to vote, James Meredith planned a walk from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. He carried nothing but a walking stick and a Bible. The 220-mile walk was an effort to show that a Black man could walk freely through the South. As Meredith commented, "I was at war against fear."

On the second day of his walk, however, James Meredith was ambushed by Aubrey James Norville, a Memphis hardware clerk. Norville shot him four times and left him to die in the middle of the road. Incredibly, Meredith survived the shooting.

And then a remarkable thing happened. As he recuperated in the hospital, dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of people gathered to continue his walk from Memphis to Jackson. On the last day, a recovered James Meredith accompanied by 12,000 marchers entered Mississippi's state capitol. (5)

I believe that is what the kingdom of God will be like. One man was slain on a cross. And that started a parade. At first only a few were brave enough to join it, but that few grew to hundreds, then thousands, then millions. Among these people are a few righteous souls. But these few righteous are outnumbered by the thousands, no, millions of persons, who have not been all they might have been, or should have been, but they've been healed by the wounds of their Master.

The kingdom of God has come that was the central message of Jesus' earthly ministry. The kingdom of God is marching forward, and nothing can stop its forward momentum, nothing can prevail against it, not even the gates of Hell. And you have a front-row invitation to be a part of it. This is the greatness of God's grace: salvation cannot be earned, it is a free gift of love offered to all who will accept it. Don't let your goodness get in the way of Jesus' righteousness. Don't let your sanctity overshadow Jesus' sacrifice. Believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior and claim your place in the Kingdom of God today.

II

Integrity

That creative writer Father Andrew Greeley (Never had an unpublished thought as a theologian nor dream as a fiction writer) tells a story--a parable, really--about two sisters who worked as babysitters in their community. A young couple had recently moved into the neighborhood. They hired the younger of the two sisters to sit with their children.

Imagine their surprise when they came home to find their home a complete mess, with their kids looking haggard, and the babysitter half asleep on the couch.

The next day, however, the children excitedly told their parents how they had fun with the new babysitter, and how she had helped them do some assignments including saying their prayers.

But this did not change the parent's decision to fire the babysitter.

The next time the couple needed a sitter they hired the older sister. They were greatly impressed when they got home this time to discover the house was tidy and the kids were already asleep.

"The kids have been like angels," the older girl announced, and, gratefully, the couple gave her an extra tip.

The next morning the kids came complaining to their parents, accusing the babysitter of yelling at them with swear words, calling her boyfriend instead of helping them with their assignments, and then forcing them to go to bed early while she went outside and smoked and talked with some of her friends.

Now, if you were in the shoes of these parents, which of the babysitters will you hire the next time? (1)

Jesus was in a conversation with the chief priests and the elders of the people and he told a parable about a man who had two sons. The man went to the first one and said, "Son, I want you

to work in the vineyard today.” The older son was in a somewhat rebellious mood and answered, “No way!” But afterwards he felt bad about his response and went and did what he was expected to do.

The father went to the second son, the younger boy, and made the same request of him.

“Sure, Pop,” said the second son, but he never did go into the vineyard.

“Which son,” asked Jesus of chief priests and the elders, “did what his father wanted?”

And the chief priests and elders gave the only possible correct answer. It was the first son who did what his father wanted.

Interesting parable. We always enjoy it when Jesus sticks it to the chief priests and elders or to the scribes and Pharisees. Unless, of course, when we suspect that he could be talking to you and me. Let’s see if that could be the case here.

There seem to be three basic lessons here. **The first is the importance of doing what we say we are going to do.** Could that ever apply to us?

An unknown writer tells the story of a young widow whose husband was killed in Desert Storm and left her to raise their two children. During the wake for her husband, several family members and close friends came up to her and told her that they would be there for her. During the following years, however, some people were there for her when she needed them, including some people who never made that promise, but there were others who were so eager during the wake to offer help but never called or visited. (2)

Does that sound possible--that somebody could make a promise like that and not keep it? Does that cause anyone just a twinge of guilt? My guess it does. It is so easy to glibly say, “Oh, yes, I’ll pray for you,” and never pray. Or to say, “I’ll be by to check on you,” and never go by. “The road paved with good intentions . . .”

“Sure, Pop, I’ll go . . .”

“We live in an era of unkept promises,” “Nations sign important treaties and then break them at will Do you know why there is a war in Ukraine. A Broken treaty signed by the United States and Russia.. And many couples show little regard for their wedding vows. In this kind of society, we who are God’s people should be known for keeping our promises.”

Brilliant Christian scholar and writer C. S. Lewis. Lewis, of course, was the author of several literary classics such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Space Trilogy* and *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis took the truth that Christians should be known for keeping their promises seriously.

“His biography tells of the suffering he endured because he kept a promise he had made to a buddy during World War I. This friend was worried about the care of his wife and small daughter if he should be killed in battle, so Lewis assured him that if that were to happen he would look after them. As the war dragged on, the man was killed. True to his word, Lewis took care of his friend’s family. Yet no matter how helpful he tried to be, the woman was ungrateful, rude, arrogant, and domineering. Through it all, Lewis kept forgiving her. He refused to let her actions become an excuse to renege on his promise.” (3)

Many of us would renege, wouldn’t we? What is more frustrating than to try our best to help someone and to be met with gross ingratitude? Perhaps it is a child, or an aging parent, perhaps it is a sibling or a friend. Don’t they know that the time and the money that you devote to them is your sacrificial gift because you care for them? Evidently not. They sure don’t act like it.

C. S. Lewis kept his promise. He had no power to control his friend’s widow’s response to his kindnesses. But he did have the power to choose to keep his word.

It’s important to do what you say. **In fact one could make the argument that the key to a successful life is to be a promise keeper.**

Certainly that is true in important relationships like marriage and parenthood. In one of his plays author Thornton Wilder has one of his characters say, "I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married, and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn't a house that protected them; and it wasn't our love that protected them--it was that promise." (4)

Not to brag but to illustrate, the last thing my wife said to me was "The best thing I ever did was marry you." Why she said that, I think, is that for 14 years I took care of her including changing her diapers so she could stay at home. When she became sicker, and was in a nursing home, I talked to her every morning and night. Is this to my credit, NO. I promised to love her in sickness and in health. I just lived out my promise.

It's true in marriage and family life, but it's true in every aspect of life.

If you read Stars and Stripes, so often we hear of flag officers being punished and reprimanded for inappropriate relationships that were unheard of years ago.

It's a matter of character; it's a matter of integrity.

One of the saddest commentaries on our time is that we can cite so few people who are people with unquestioned integrity, particularly people in the public eye. That would have been unthinkable in earlier times.

Let me tell you something about President Abraham Lincoln that you may not know. Before he went into politics Lincoln and another man bought a general store in New Salem, IL. Lincoln and his business partner attempted to run the store as a profitable business. But owing to unwise investments and general mismanagement, the store finally went under.

Not long thereafter Lincoln's partner died, leaving him under a mountain of debt. But unlike many others who went bankrupt in frontier ventures and skipped town to escape their creditors, Lincoln promised to repay every cent he owed. He fulfilled this promise even though it took him more than fifteen years to retire the debt. When Abraham Lincoln made a commitment, his word was good as gold. Lincoln was a promise keeper if there ever was one. No wonder he became, in the estimation of many, our greatest president. (6)

Is it too much to expect of our public officials to exhibit that kind of integrity today? What about leaders in business or in the Army or any place of responsibility, including in the home?

Oh, every once in a while we hear about someone who exhibits such character. When it happens, it is like the proverbial breath of fresh air.

There was a beautiful story in the magazine *In Touch* a few years back. It was about Coach Cleveland Stroud of the Rockdale County, GA Blue Collar Bulldogs. Stroud was coach for 18 years before his basketball team made it to the state championship.

Stroud recalls that "it was the perfect night" when they won that championship. "A night you dream of." He was carried around the gym on the shoulders of his triumphant players and their proud parents. The local paper put his picture on the front page.

But the excitement was short-lived. Two months after the championship, during a routine grade check, Stroud discovered that one player was academically ineligible. The player had only played 45 seconds during the regional qualifying tournament but that was 45 seconds more than he should have played.

Stroud says, "I thought it was all ruined. I went through a phase where I was really depressed." He struggled with what to do next. His commitment to integrity led him to the right decision.

“Winning is the most important thing for any coach,” he says. “But your principles have to be higher than your goals.” He reported the error to the league and the Bulldogs forfeited their trophy.

When the team lamented their loss in the locker room, he told them, “You’ve got to do what is honest, what is right, and what the rules say. People forget the scores of basketball games, but they don’t ever forget what you are made of.” (7)

Thank God for coaches like Cleveland Stroud. Thank God for people of character whoever they may be. **That is one of the primary legacies that we leave to those who come after us--the reputation of always seeking to do what is right.**

In his book, *I Almost Missed the Sunset*, gospel song writer Bill Gaither tells about the legacy that he received from his grandfather. Gaither says that he and his wife Gloria had been married a couple of years. They were teaching school in Alexandria, Indiana, where Bill had grown up, and they wanted a piece of land where they could build a house.

Bill noticed the parcel south of town where cattle grazed, and he learned it belonged to a ninety-two-year-old retired banker named Mr. Yule. Mr. Yule owned a lot of land in the area, and he gave the same speech to everyone who inquired: “I promised the farmers they could use it for their cattle.”

Bill and Gloria decided to pay Mr. Yule a visit at the bank. Although he was retired, he spent a couple of hours each morning in his office. He looked at them over the top of his bifocals.

Bill introduced himself and told Mr. Yule they were interested in a piece of his land. “Not selling,” Mr. Yule said pleasantly. “Promised it to a farmer for grazing.”

“I know,” Bill said, “but we teach school here and thought maybe you’d be interested in selling it to someone planning to settle in the area.”

Mr. Yule pursed his lips and stared at Bill. “What’d you say your name was?” he asked.

“Gaither. Bill Gaither.”

“Hmmm. Any relation to Grover Gaither?” asked the banker.

“Yes, sir. He was my granddad.”

Mr. Yule put down his paper and removed his glasses. “Interesting. Grover Gaither was the best worker I ever had on my farm. Full day’s work for a day’s pay. So honest. What’d you say you wanted?”

Bill told him again.

“Let me do some thinking on it, then come back and see me,” he said.

Bill came back within the week, and Mr. Yule told him he had had the property appraised. Bill held his breath. “How does \$3,800 sound?” he asked. “Would that be okay?”

If that was per acre, Bill thought, he would have to come up with nearly \$60,000! “\$3,800?” Bill repeated.

“Yup,” said Mr. Yule. “Fifteen acres for \$3,800.”

Bill knew the property had to be worth at least three times that. He readily accepted.

Nearly three decades later, Bill Gaither and his son strolled that beautiful, lush property that had once been pasture land. “Benjy,” Bill said to his son, “you’ve had this wonderful place to grow up through nothing that you’ve done, but because of the good name of a great-granddad you never met.” (8)

My friend, you and I won’t leave a more important legacy to our children and grandchildren than a reputation for seeking in all ways to do the right thing.

It’s important to do what we say we will do, to be a promise keeper. This is the most important legacy that we can leave the world.

III Fr Desiano

Choice is more important to our culture than ever before. Whole industries are built around giving people options. Go down the cereal aisle in the store; we are astonished at the variety. I marvel at the size of pet food options. Are pets really that fussy, or is it their owners? Some people might argue that having too many choices is a problem. We need to simplify life.

But look how complicated one of our greatest choices has become, the choice we make when voting? So many people are so ambivalent they don't even bother. "It makes no difference." But our church has urged every citizen to vote. The more of us do, the clearer the direction of our nation will become, and the harder it will be for others to try to interfere with our vote. Choice is essential.

It seems from our Gospel that God very much believes in the power of choice. Jesus give a very simple parable about two sons. One says "no" but changes his mind. The other says "yes" but doesn't follow through. But each one has a choice. And, more importantly, the power to choose again, the capacity to rethink what we've chosen and do something better—or, perhaps, worse. Ezekiel simplified things for his ancient hearers: if someone chooses the good, there's a reward. If someone chooses evil, there are consequences.

God uses our ability to choose, and the amount of time we have, to call us to wholeness. God gives us chances to decide again and again. Every time we come to Mass, aren't we make another decision to put God at the center of our lives? God does this to give us every chance to experience conversion, to be like the son who says "no" but returns to what the Father wants of him. God does this so that we will know there's never a reason to give up on ourselves, or to give up on God.

After all, has not God chosen us? Paul uses an important hymn in our second reading to show the extent to which God has chosen us in Jesus. Although he was divine, Jesus chose to humble himself. The Greek word says that he "emptied himself," gave up everything he had, to identify with us in our death. We may be indifferent and ambivalent about many things but we cannot be ambivalent about God's love for us. God's choice of us cannot be doubted.

If we are honest, we can see a little bit of "no" in our lives, the parts that resist God's love in us. But we also see a little bit of "yes" in our hearts, the parts that want to respond to the infinite love God has shown us. Jesus asks us when we are going to give up our "no" and let the love of God claim our whole heart. He says to his opponents that if some of the worst sinners could respond to God's invitation, if they could say "yes," than why cannot they make up their minds? Why cannot we make up our minds?

In spite of our hesitations, choice is one of the greatest gifts that God has given us. It's a way to show what we think, what we want, and, ultimately, what's in our hearts. If we have let moments of choice that can shape our lives and our nation pass by, we should not let the moments we have to choose God's Kingdom sit idle and go to waste in our own lives.