

## 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021B

In today's Gospel text Jesus says, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Jesus is pointing us to "the within" part of us as the place where change needs to take place. We are to get our hearts right with God, and by "hearts," I really mean the seat of our passions, so that our intentions are not evil.

Although Jesus was talking about evil deeds and the intentions behind them, I want to focus on the roots of **good** deeds. Yes, evil intentions come from within, but so do good intentions.

Intentions are worth considering for they are directly related to how we live in general, and how we live as God's people in particular. We can make a conscious choice to live according to our best understanding of God's way -- indeed, that's part of what conversion is about, and why it's sometimes called a decision for Christ. Part of receiving Christ into our lives involves adjusting our intentions. Of course, conversion is larger than that, for it also involves Christ's saving action on our behalf, and often his inspiring of our will, but the adjustment of our intentions happens because of our decision to commit ourselves to Christ.

What's more, for our intention to be effective, it needs to be decided in a general way ahead of the specific situations where we intend our Christianity to show. That is, if we wait for crisis moments to decide whether we will or will not behave in an ethically and morally responsible manner, there may be too much immediate pressure to promote clear thinking. But, if we've settled ahead of time our intention to always be guided by the spirit of our faith, then it's more likely that, when a crisis moment comes, we will react or act in keeping with our intention.

However, we also need to link our intentions with follow through. There are good reasons for the old saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." It can mean, for one thing, that our intentions were never connected to an action plan, or that something distracted us from following through. It can also mean that we made a good start, but then got sidetracked by a bad habit, by non-productive behavior, by forgetting our resolves or whatever. But the point is that intentions alone are usually not sufficient to put our faith into action. They need to be tied to a plan.

One way to do that is to use part of our prayer time to think about places we expect to be during the day and people we will likely see. We can consider how we want to project our commitment to Christ in the way we will behave. Sure, unexpected things will arise, but having spent prayer time over our intentions will make it more likely we will act in the specific situation as we intend.

In one sense, it seems a long way from Jesus talking about the source of evil, to our behaving out of our commitment to follow Him. But the common thread is intention. Consider that someone may commit a vile act but for what seems like a "good" reason in that person's less-than-sane mind -- such as a person who drowns a child intending to send it to heaven and away from a bad earthly situation. It is also possible to do a good deed, but for a less-than-sane reason.

More commonly, however, good deeds are sometimes done for sane but self-serving reasons, when the intention is primarily to benefit the doer rather than the recipient. For example, if a politician pushes through a project to benefit a low-income community, that's a good deed. But if the primary intention is to "buy" that community's votes the next time the politician runs, the deed is also self-serving.

And on an individual level, it's possible to help someone else mainly to make us feel good. We're reminded of the lines from T.S Eliot's play, **Murder in the Cathedral**, which say, "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason."

Jesus was surely talking about intentions when he said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:1).

None of this is to suggest that we should avoid doing good deeds until we're sure our intentions are pure. From the point of view of the helped person, the deed is still a blessing. But in terms of our spiritual life, giving over our intentions as well as our actions to God's service is an important part of discipleship.

Deacon Gerry

