

August 19, 2017  
Matthew 21:28-32

“Who Did the Will of the Father?”

John Wesley United Methodist Church  
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It goes without saying that the big news around Falmouth this weekend is the 45th running of the Falmouth Road Race. Now many of us may take this event rather lightly, but there are thousands and thousands of runners and spectators that take it very seriously. I think because there's something about running, and pushing yourself, and achieving a goal, that give people a sense of inner satisfaction, and even bliss. Every athlete knows this and feels this. And, to a somewhat lesser degree, even non-athletes, with the advent of "fitbits", devices you wear on your wrist or clothing that counts the number of steps you walk in a day. How many of you here today are wearing a fitbit? Don't you feel that inner satisfaction and bliss when you hit seven thousand, ten thousand, fifteen thousand or more steps in a day. I know I do. And where does that desire and willpower “to do” come from? Well, to quote a line from one of my all time favorite movies, *Chariots of Fire*, a movie about running... "Everyone runs in his own way, or her own way. And where does the willpower come from, to see the race to its end? It comes from within." It comes from within.

Now this summer we've been looking at and discussing questions that either God or Jesus Christ asked of various individuals. And in today's Scripture lesson we hear a parable, and then we hear Jesus ask the disciples, and again, us, a question. "Who did the will of the father?" Who did the will of the Father? It seems rather simple, but there's a twist. A corollary to the question which I'll get to shortly. So let's look at it again. Both sons in the parable heard what their father wanted them to do. Go out into the vineyard and work. Now, because this is a parable, I'm sure you can guess that the father is God, the sons, and daughters, are us, and the vineyard is the world out there. The world that is hurting and suffering. Now the first son initially said no, but somehow was able to change his mind, and eventually got to yes. The second son said yes, but then didn't deliver. He said he would go, but he didn't. And unfortunately, that's true of so many people who profess a commitment to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus Christ, but don't live up to that responsibility. It's no secret that one of the complaints against Christians, and why people are reluctant to come to church, is because they feel we are hypocrites. That we say one thing and then act differently. It reminds me of the old story of the man who said to a pastor, “I believe in God, I just don't go to church because there are so many hypocrites there.” The pastor responded by saying, “Oh, don't let that stop you. There's always room for one more.” But in all seriousness, I think the Rev. Peter Gomes puts it best. He writes, "the history of the world is the history of good ideas gone bad. That's why people like Jesus listeners, people like you and me, well-

intentioned people, need to hear this question, "Who did the will of the father?" Because your life, and your church, are full of people who are willing to say yes to all the right things. Of course we want peace, of course we want justice and righteousness, and of course, we want to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Yes, these are all easy things to say "yes" to. We see it all the time, but so often people don't deliver. And so think about it. What happens when your "yes" turns to "no", or your "yes" becomes just a "maybe".<sup>1</sup> Well, I'll tell you. For one thing, you'll disappoint a lot of people, not to mention disappointing God. But more important, when we say we are a Christian and then we don't live out our faith in our daily living, when we say one thing and act differently, instead of making a positive impact for Christ, we make a negative impact. And we could even turn people away from Christ.

"Who did the will of the Father?" Who did the will of the Father? Here's a good case in point. Many of you are familiar with the well known Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, the largest United Methodist Church in the country, led by Rev. Adam Hamilton, its highly respected pastor, who has worked so hard over the years to lead his church in areas of mission and outreach. In fact, it's his church's number one priority. It's analogous to the purpose of our Invitation and Hospitality Ministry Team. Well, unbeknownst to anyone, a Kansas City newspaper decided to send two of its reporters out in the city, undercover as homeless people. One was a male and the other a female, one black and one white. They were to go to one of the churches in the area and see how they were treated, and then report back. Just before their story was to hit the news stands, the editor called Hamilton to tell him that the church the two undercover reporters attended was extremely unwelcoming. They were not spoken to, or invited into the sanctuary, or for fellowship afterwards. Rather, they were just ignored. The "homeless black woman" said she literally felt invisible as congregants went out of their way to avoid her.

Hamilton thought the editor was going to ask him his opinion, his commentary, on what had happened at a local church. But then the editor said, "The church I'm speaking about, was your church."

Hamilton said it felt like a knife was plunged deep into his stomach. A knife. For all the times his congregation professed to be friendly and welcoming, for all the times they promised to practice outreach, for all the times they committed to love unconditionally and to treat others like they would want to be treated... their actions told a completely different story. They obviously didn't do the will of the Father.

Now if we really reflect on this incident, we all know the same thing could happen right here, as well, at John Wesley. In fact, consider how many times you, yourself have intentionally talked to a new or

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<sup>1</sup> *Getting to Yes*, Peter Gomes

“different” person on a Sunday morning. Or, how often you haven’t. And if it can happen within these walls, on holy ground, that same attitude can follow us out these doors as we go and live out our lives in the community. You see, we, too, are being asked by the Father to go out into his vineyard and love unconditionally, and treat others like we want to be treated. And yet, so often we don’t. And think about it. Why is there such a disconnect between what we profess and how we act? Because it's really not a very big step to go from ignoring a person or treating someone as invisible, to turning into a Charlottesville incident. Unfortunately, too often, we profess to follow the Prince of Peace, and then we lash out in anger at someone. We profess to follow Christ who taught us to forgive and have mercy, but instead we harbor resentment and bitterness. We profess to follow the One who reached out and was accepting of people of all faiths and nationalities, accepting of all those on the margins of society, and yet we are intolerant and judgmental. We profess to follow the One who said, “treat others the way you want to be treated,” and then we go around gossiping, making judgments, ignoring the needs of those right in front of us. We profess so much, and even say, "yes, I will go", but....

So as we think about this parable and Jesus’ question, "Who did the will of the father?" we are inevitably forced to make a comparison of the two sons. One who says he will do what his father asks, but doesn't, with one who says he won't, but does. And then here's the twist. It then forces us to ask ourselves another question, *Which one am I?* Which one are you? Do you have the willpower within to say “yes” to what God is asking, and then do it?

Let me get back to where I started this evening. About running in a race. St. Paul described our Christian journey as a race, and the strength and willpower needed to finish. Because like running a race, there's a prize at the end for the winner. And the Bible describes in many places that prize that will be awarded. So to all you sons and daughters trying to do the will of the Father, I know it's hard, but I want to leave you with these promises:

- *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord... since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.*
- *Do not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time you will reap a harvest if you do not give up.*
- *Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*
- *What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived — these things God has prepared for those who love him.*

- *Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.*
- *Well done, good and faithful servant... Come and share your master's happiness!*
- *And finally, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearing. Amen.*