

"Two Ways, at Least" by Dan Phillips



Greetings from the Mt Vernon Baptist Church! It has been a long time, and I am aware that it has been too long a time, since I spoke to the Seekers' community. It is with great thankfulness that I share with you, as I know it is special to be allowed to join this fellowship for just one day.

Being warned in a dream, no, being warned by my own experience at Seekers, I studied up before I came here. This is no place to be unaware, or unprepared. So I read the

sermons from the last few Sundays and I read the liturgy for this season of recommitment.

And I thought: how interesting to be here and speaking of commitment after having looked at the Matthew reading in the lectionary. That reading lead me into several weeks of reflection on my own life and my relationship with God, churches, and faith. First, let's look at the story.

(As I relate this story, I will translate into a modern context.) In that reading, Jesus, the great story teller, has again resorted to a story to make a point. Jesus is responding to those who have asked him where his authority comes from. Jesus, of course, asks them a question in return. Where, says Jesus, does Billy Graham's authority come from? Now what Jesus is asking is "Is Billy Graham a legitimately righteous person?" The Baptists, the ones who were asking the question, were afraid to answer, as they knew they would offend public opinion if they said "NO" but not wanting to say "Yes" about someone they could not control, said "We don't know." Then, said Jesus, I will not tell you where my authority comes from.

But, says Jesus, let me tell you a story. There was a man who had two sons. And the man went to the oldest son and said "Please go cut the lawn." "I will not" said the oldest son. But later, he changed his mind and began to cut the lawn. Meanwhile, the man had gone to the younger son and said "Please go cut the lawn." "Sure, dad" said the younger son, but he went to out to party instead, and never even looked at the lawn. Which son, asked Jesus, did what the father asked him to do? The Baptists said "Why the first son, of course." Well, said Jesus, I tell you that the gay community and the illegal immigrants are going into the country of God while you are not, because they have done what God has asked them to do, and you have not.

This story is fascinating, because it addresses the dichotomy of our lives. We as human beings are constantly torn between mind and heart, body and soul, thought and passion, talk and action. Everywhere I look I see this

duality, this need to reconcile conflicting, contradictory parts of ourselves.

For me, duality has long been a theme in my poetry. I experience this duality in many parts of my life: personal, family, and religious. Let me share with you a poem that addresses this theme.

SPIRIT

The Spirit is a troublesome thing
Fiery heart pain on the wing
Harrowing separating
Opening our heart
Rending stretching
Taking us apart.
The Spirit is a healing thing
Warm soft breath calm in a ring
Lifting raising
Holding our soul
Restoring Creating
Making us whole

And this is often the way that I experience faith: as something that both irritates and soothes me, something that challenges and comforts at the same time. And I see it, but I don't understand it. I wrestle with it, I yell at it, and I try to ignore it. But I can't. I did like, however, the response of Peter Bankson when he said: "I have a growing sense that Jesus loves me, and will love me even if I admit that I don't understand." How can you believe what you don't understand, cannot articulate, don't comprehend? I don't know, but like Peter, I feel called to find out.

In addition to showing us that we are conflicted beings, this Jesus-story highlights the contradiction between speech and action. We find it easier to say yes than to do yes. Speech is easier than action, usually, and we generally want

to take the easier path. Perhaps a poem will illustrate:

HELPING HAND

Full we are content
To talk about the poor
At home we are able
To pray for those traveling
Feeling good
We can eagerly
Call the sick
And commiserate

This poem is about the fact that we find it easier to talk of things when they don't affect us.

So it sounds like action is always better than speech, deeds more important than words. But it's not that simple! Surely the older son's response hurt the father. Most likely it reflected a broken or painful relationship with the father. Most of us would much rather our children both said yes and did yes, than said no and did yes. I don't think Jesus is saying here that actions are all important, and words don't count.

Rather, Jesus is saying that perspective matters. Perspective is how we look at the world. And our perspective is also often conflicted. I will share another poem to illustrate this.

BOUND ANGEL

While standing behind her father
In the long library line
I saw the small
Black haired round faced angel
Stretching her arms to the light
Trying to reach herself

Out of her father's hands
And then I knew
Her father was not lifting her
But selfishly keeping her
From flying away

Seeing the child as a bound angel changes the meaning of the situation. Seeing things differently always changes meanings. That's why Jesus told so many stories. He was always attempting to get people to see things from another perspective, to see another way. Anna Gilcher called it "two places of belonging, two ways of seeing the world."

So what perspective was Jesus trying to show his listeners? I believe he was saying that sometimes we religious types get all wrapped up in the words and forget the actions. We want to insure that things are said right, that doctrine is agreed upon, that phrasing does not offend, that everyone's concerns are verbally met, that we forget that ultimately, action is what it is all about. What does the doctrine matter if we use it hatefully to exclude others? What does the right phrasing matter if we are not willing to live as we speak? What does our righteous pretension matter if we are not willing to "let the scared become sacred", as Anna suggested, or "to put the life and ministry of Jesus into practice. To love him in action" as Marjorie told us?

And what was the difference between the two groups, the difference that led to differing perspectives? It was one of faith. They believe, said Jesus, and you do not. Standing here as one of the most determined skeptics I know, I tell you that faith has been hard for me. Believing enough to change my perspective has been a hard journey in the past, and remains hard today. I fight all the way to keep from believing. Maybe it's the things that people want me to believe in: financial bailouts, weapons of mass destruction, heaven and hell, whatever. I still find it hard. But I will share with you one final poem.

A NEW BELIEVER

Do you believe
In ghosts
I never did before
But I see them more
As I age
Just yesterday I played basketball
Again with my dead brother Bill
In the driveway of our old home
It was a lousy court to play on,
And the basket still had no net
But we had fun again

Last week I talked
To my father
In a dream
I could not believe how understanding
He is now
But then
He has a new perspective
From his grave on a green Tennessee hill
Tomorrow I may see more ghosts
Maybe the ghosts of my sons
As they were when they were young
When I was young
I am becoming
A believer