### “I Go, Sir” Steve Finlan for The First Church, October 1, 2023

**Philippians 2:1–5**

1If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

**Matthew 21:28–32**

28 “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

What great passages, with some good one liners. Philippians has the one-liner, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit” (2:3). Also, for example, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (2:5). These are good principles to live by. Why? Because they teach love.

And Jesus’ story is an amazing one, despite how short it is. Who did the will of the Father, the one who *said* he would do his father’s will, or the one who *actually* did the will? The answer is obvious. The parable is a criticism of those who talk a good game but don’t play it: hypocrites, in other words.

Better to be an argumentative but ultimately cooperative son than a fake and lying son. Better even to be a tax collector or prostitute who listened to a true prophet like John, and then decided to follow his teachings, than to be a pompous religious figure who doesn’t listen to true prophets.

What were these two brothers like? Let’s flesh them out a little. The second one was all bluster, apparently. He talks a good game, but doesn’t follow through. He claims to be willing to help his father, but he doesn’t actually do what he was asked. The first brother is more interesting and complicated. He appears to be argumentative and rebellious. He sasses back at his dad that he will not go to work. But then he decides to do the work. He’s a more engaged and responsible person, although perhaps a bit mouthy. He *doesn’t* talk a good game. He doesn’t brag about how cooperative he is, or how much he supports his father.

But he’s willing, when all is said and done, to do the actual work. Maybe he doesn’t enjoy a good reputation in society. It’s usually people who talk themselves up who tend to gather a following. The first brother is probably no good at self-promotion. But he evidently loves his father, and that’s what matters. His loyalty is genuine, and not just lip service.

Genuineness is the main point of this brief and powerful parable. Maybe it also tells us something about family dynamics, about how two brothers are often the opposites of each other. Parents try to do the best to encourage character growth in their children, and of course it makes a difference, but ultimately, it’s out of their hands. “Your children are not your children,” says Kahlil Gibran, “they come through you but not from you . . . You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth” (*The Prophet*, the chapter “Children”).

It is our job as parents to help launch those arrows, to provide, to the best of our ability, a firm foundation and guidance for that journey forward. But the children, and then the young adults, will develop their characters based on their own choices. The first son is a bit sassy, saying “I will not,” but ultimately, his loyalty is genuine.

Paul, also, is talking about genuine devotion, about actively seeking the mind of Christ, seeking love over selfishness, compassion over opinion. Have you noticed that some people would rather be right than happy? In fact, they would rather be *wrong* than happy. They cherish the arguing, whether they are right or wrong. They enjoy verbal combat, and they especially enjoy offending people’s sensibilities. It is bratty teenage behavior, often carried on by people who are way beyond their teenage years. If these folks start maturing mentally and emotionally, if they become ready to seek guidance, then we might offer some help.

But for those who really *want* to become mature, Paul recommends seeking “encouragement and consolation . . . compassion and sympathy” (Phil 2:1), being in “accord and of one mind” with others (2:2). He is looking for ways to have a loving environment within congregations, where people actively support each other’s spiritual lives. Elsewhere, he says “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).

The early church was a very important social institution in people’s lives. Members had accepted a teaching about God and Jesus, and accepted the fact that they had to change their behaviors. The church community helped them to affirm their choices, their changed lives and beliefs. The church can still perform that function today, both a support function for believers and an opportunity for believers to serve others. In a way, it’s how we can cooperate with the request, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today” (Matt 21:28). The church gives us an opportunity to practice the love and Christ-mindedness for which we strive. The church family can reflect the best example of what God’s family is like.