

Why the Saying “You Can’t Win!” Makes Sense but Is Not the Whole Story

Proper 9, Year A, RCL. Romans 7:15-25a. Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30.
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost. July 9, 2017. The Episcopal Shared
Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of
Ohio. The Rev’d Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

Today’s readings from Paul and Matthew give us the Bible’s version of the old saying, “You can’t win”—meaning no matter what you do, there’s some influence that opposes a good outcome (even if your intentions are good, which they aren’t always).

Paul notes that the basic problem is internal to the human will—we are impeded by evil, so that we are not able to clearly choose and execute good things. Our will and understanding, though influenced by God, are not reliable, because they are also influenced by evil, resulting in the less than perfect outcome we call sin. Christian teaching has long been that unless one is in a state of perfect grace—that is, completely under the influence of God—some moral imperfection is part of every choice one makes. And for most of us, and even for those standouts of holiness we call saints, states of perfect grace are rare. (Saints rarely claim much for themselves in the way of moral perfection, though they do have the splendid habit of depending on the

redeeming grace of God, as Saint Paul himself clearly does in today's reading.)

But the problem is not only internal. Our desire to act well, to have a good influence on the people around us and all God's creation, is thwarted by evil acting from the outside. Often this is not deliberate nastiness but the seemingly reasonable result of confusion in perception, understanding and action that is the internal result of evil. When Jesus says his version of "You can't win!" he puts it like this:

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." (Matthew 11:18-19)

The John referred to here is of course Jesus' cousin John the Baptist. John was an ascetic, that is, he kept a very tight rein on all comforts and appetites in order to be very connected to God. So, of course, people tended to dismiss him as a fanatic, perhaps demon possessed (because his typical tone was fierce and tended to make people uncomfortable). Irritating extremist at best, dangerous lunatic at worst.

Jesus, on the other hand, seems to have accepted dinner invitations from all sorts of people, even those not necessarily socially or religiously acceptable by the standards of the Judaism of his time, and when he ate and drank he seems to have genuinely enjoyed himself. This was so characteristic of his take on life that he used the image of a gigantic dinner party as his standard image for the fullness of God's kingdom "on earth as in heaven." This approach got him dismissed as a mere party animal (as we would say) by people who disapproved of how wide he swung the mantle of inclusion. Surely God couldn't be revealing his truth through someone like *that*, who associates with *those* people and seems to downplay even moderate asceticism. I mean, that cranky *John* was just awful, but Jesus, well, he's just as bad in his own way, just as over the top, don't you know?

"Yet wisdom," says Jesus (you can just hear him sigh as he says it) "is vindicated by her deeds."

That's how Jesus says it in the Gospel according to Matthew. I think it's interesting that the Gospel according to *Luke* reports this saying of Jesus as follows: "Wisdom will be vindicated by all her *children*." (Luke 7:35; emphasis added) This is typical of Luke's tendency, when telling the story of Jesus, to emphasize the personal and relational aspects of life over rules and performance.

We are called by Jesus to do the deeds of Wisdom, to get Wisdom's work done, by being—or becoming more and more—Wisdom's children. The character and intentions of God are not displayed through an abstract set of rules or a list of accomplishments so much as through the character and choices of real people who get it that God is up to something wonderful for the life of the world.

Wisdom's children don't look for excuses to dismiss God's messengers or God's message. Wisdom's children do their best not to be put off by something they perceive as unpleasant in the presentation of information that something else, some intimation of divine influence, tells them might make all the difference in their lives. Evil does not want us to pay attention to the Spirit of Life, Love and Joy. Evil wants us to see flaws in the presentation, infer fatal flaws in the character and understanding of the messenger, and reject the message of hope and renewal altogether. So easy, when all of us are so flawed, to project our own failure of perfection onto another, to see in John the raving of a Rasputin or in Jesus the self-indulgence of a Medici bishop of the Renaissance. So easy to evade God because sin is so real and so common rather than to seek God because God is even more real than sin and has the means to deal with it. Which, uncomfortably for us, means dealing with *us*: our misperceptions,

prejudices, evasions, and self-preoccupation. (Though if we take the life and work of Jesus seriously, notably as expressed in comments like the ones on which this sermon is based, we are obliged to notice that dealing with the mess we have gotten ourselves into is not so very comfortable for God, either.)

That was the situation in which John and Jesus and Paul had to operate and it's the same for us. Holy Wisdom is always calling us to be her children. True faith is not easy because it is actively opposed by evil. Belittling faith's practitioners and witnesses is just one of the methods evil deploys to decondition us from being wise and alert where God's truth is concerned.

We are confronted all the time with challenges evil would like us to roll over and avoid, dismissing the holy opportunity with some lame or vicious excuse. To take an important example, the Bible is not a snap to read (usually) and its message can require some energy to get a good grip on. Some of that energy we supply from within ourselves, some we supply to one another, and some (the critical part) comes from God. But we will not engage the humility or persistence to encounter Holy Wisdom and know her for who she is so long as we give in to despair over our own imperfections or those of others. The

spiteful disdainers are the cruelest children of despair.

Let our prayer this day be that we will not add our flawed and fearful voices to the shallow, simplistic dismissal of Holy Wisdom; rather, may we rein in our resistance, listen to the Spirit of the Most High God, and be found among Wisdom's children. For, in spite of the spiteful disdainers and our own weakness, we—you, me, everybody—*can* win. Thanks be to God who has given us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord! (1 Corinthians 15:57; similar to the conclusion of today's Epistle, Romans 7:25a)