“JUST DO IT!”

Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

We’ve all been to wedding receptions where one of the dances that they do to get people involved is the “Hokey Pokey.” You may not be a proficient ballroom dancer, but that’s no excuse. Anybody, everybody can do the Hokey Pokey! “You put your right arm in, you put your right arm out...” --- you know how it goes! Finally, they get to the last verse: “you put your whole self in.” This fall we are talking about “Lee Way --- Making Room for God in Our Lives,” exploring the words of Jesus and the letters of Paul. We are finding, lo and behold, that this matter of leeway, of creating space for God in our lives is not simply a matter of a few minutes here and a few minutes there, but rather the challenge to a deeper commitment in every area of our lives. If we are going to follow Jesus, we are going to be challenged to put our whole selves in.

More than 25 years ago now, someone at the Nike corporation came up with a slogan that stuck. Along with the swoosh, which is Nike’s logo, is the phrase: “Just do it!” “Just do it!” is a call to action. It symbolizes the bold confidence of an athlete who is ready and willing to put his or her whole self in for the sake of the game. If we are going to be winners in athletic endeavors, we are going to have to put our whole selves in. The word “Nike” itself comes from the Greek word for victory. It is the same word that is in the stained glass window above the altar in our sanctuary. “Nika” is the Greek word for victory. In the stained glass and in our faith journey, we are talking not about the victory of our favorite sports team, but the Easter victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death. We may have our moments of discouragement and depression. We may not always be on top of the pile. But our faith teaches us that ultimately we shall be victorious, for we follow a victorious Lord, who has put all things under his feet, even death itself. Even at funerals we can boldly, confidently say, “O death, where is your sting; a grave where is your victory? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

The God of victory continually calls us to put our whole selves in. But you and I hesitate. After all, we have a lot of irons in the fire. We have many commitments and a host of competing priorities in our lives.

This morning’s Gospel parable was told by Jesus, not only to the people of his day, but to people of every day and every age, for its message applies to all of us. Jesus begins, “A man had two sons.” He has my attention. I have two sons! “And he said to them, “Go and work in the vineyard.”

Now I’m not going to ask you to get up and bend over and think about working in the field all day picking grapes in that uncomfortable position like I did last week. We all know that day laborers have a physically challenging life. But hear the words of the father once again. He
did not say, “Go and pick the grapes.” He said, “Go and work in the vineyard.” Even more challenging than picking the fruit is breaking up the soil, digging around the vines and pulling the weeds. It’s hard work!

Not only is laboring in the vineyard hard work, there’s no guarantee that the crops will grow and that the harvest will be worth picking. The squirrels and the chipmunks may eat the seeds. The rabbits and the deer may eat the fruit and vegetables before they are ripe. Lack of rain may cause the plants to wither. Too much rain may cause the roots to rot. Last winter did more devastation to the trees and plants than any of us could have anticipated. It’s not always a rewarding effort, this agriculture business.

Besides the fact that a successful harvest is not guaranteed, there are many more exciting things and more attractive places to spend our time than working in the vineyard. Can’t you find someone else to do that hard, backbreaking work so that I can use my talents in a more advantageous way, Dad? I can be your marketing person! I can research how to produce bigger crops! I can do the long range planning for the corporation. But the father’s words remain the same: “Son, go and work in the vineyard. Do what I ask you to do!”

In recent years many churches have turned to ad campaigns and marketing strategies to attract new members. The ads usually appeal to our desire for meaning and purpose in life. “Come to church and you will find fulfillment.” While I agree totally that if we come to church we will be able to find fulfillment, the way we find fulfillment is not by doing what we want to do, but by doing what God calls us to do. We do not find fulfillment by picking and choosing, like we’re going through the line at a smorgasbord, but by putting our whole selves in, by going and working in the vineyard as God instructs us to do. We learn how to be a Christian by following in the footsteps of the Christ who washed the disciples’ feet, who gave every ounce of energy he had to serve God and his fellow human beings. “Just do it!” is not just a catchy Nike slogan. It is the call to a meaningful Christian life.

The Bible tells us that initially, the first son refused to do what his father asked him to do, but later changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard. God gives us the power to choose. God also gives us the power to change our minds. Sometimes I hear people say, “I’ve known so-and-so for twenty years. He’ll never change! She’ll never come around!” But the Bible tells us that we have the will to choose and the power to change. As long as there is life and breath, there is hope. Never give up on a person! Never say never! We have the power to change.

The second son was a crowd pleaser. He told his father what he wanted to hear. “Sure dad, I’ll be happy to go work in the vineyard.” But he never made it to the field. I’m going to guess that he didn’t outright lie to his father. He planned to go. He really did. He had every intention of getting there, but he never quite made it.

We are blessed with so many growing families at Church of the Saviour. I announce the birth of a baby at least once a month. We have baptisms quite frequently. Before I baptize a child, I always talk with the parents about the baptismal vows: Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Will you put your whole trust in God’s grace and promise to serve him as your Lord? Will you nurture this child in Christ’s holy church, that by your teaching and example he may be guided to accept God’s grace for himself, to profess the faith openly, and to lead a Christian life? Baptism is not like putting a magic bubble over a child’s head. The only way this child is going to learn what it means to be a Christian is by our teaching and example. We want your child to be part of the church from day one.

Young parents nod their heads. Most of them take this vow quite seriously. But some, like the second son in our parable, agree to these vows and then don’t get around to fulfilling
them. I was in a grocery store recently where I ran into a family whose children I baptized, now several years ago. I hadn’t seen them in a long time. I hardly recognized the kids. “We’ve been meaning to get to church,” mom said. I really believe she meant what she said. She is not a bad person. She and her husband did not lie when they took those vows, but they have not made room in their lives for God and for attending church. It’s not a priority. They have good intentions, but they are not in the vineyard.

The early church was known, not for its good intentions, not for its lofty ideals and its systematic theology, but for its sacrificial love. In a letter to the Emperor Hadrian, someone described the Christian community in this way: “They love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem, and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. He who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. When they see a stranger, they take him into their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the Spirit.” (1)

Paul tells the church at Philippi and the church in Cleveland Heights, “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united and agreeing with each other. ...Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus.” In other words, put your whole self in! Just do it! “Go work in the vineyard.” As Bishop Jonathan Keaton once said in a sermon he preached to the pastors of the East Ohio Conference, “What part of “go” don’t you understand?”!

So many of us find ourselves comfortably in the middle, not too far to the left or to the right, and certainly not “all in” in the way that our parable and the words of Paul are calling us to be committed. In his book, The Gospel According to Starbucks, Leonard Sweet says that “middles are in trouble,” and makes the case that we are in a “Starbucks world” in which the lowest common denominator is being forsaken for more distinctive positions on the margins. “Today all middles are in trouble,” he writes. “Go ahead; try to name a vibrant center. Middles: middle class, middle-management, mainline religion are all in trouble. Nobody wants to be average or to have mass appeal,” Sweet continues. “To call someone vanilla is an insult. Today no company it its right mind would name itself General Motors or General Electric or General Foods. There is no general anything, no happy medium anymore. Both ends now play against the middle.

“Before we set out for the extremes, we have to ask ourselves what’s so bad about the middle. Middle America is the backbone of our nation. But think about the middle in a different way. What is the worst thing that can happen to a passenger on an airplane? It’s having to sit in the dreaded middle seat. On buses and on subways, people would rather stand than occupy that middle space.” Sweet says, “If you don’t believe me, just Google ‘the decline of the middle,’ ‘the vanishing middle,’ ‘the loss of a center,’ or ‘the elusive middle ground.’ The shunned middle teaches us about authentic experience and its irresistible attraction in the twenty-first century. Authentic experience does not flourish in the trampled soil of the anonymous masses. It grows instead in the rarified extremes, in the fertile mulch that’s building at the two ends of the well curve.

“Avoidance of the middle explains why Starbucks does not sell a size called ‘medium.’ Medium is not a virtue. What is the emotional strength of being not large but not small either? Just sort of there in between. The Maxwell House world was a mass world: mass media, mass communications, mass culture. When I was growing up,” Sweet says, “I was taught that the place to be was the center of the mass. To be at the heart of anything was to be at the center. But today’s world doesn’t go for the anonymous hump in the middle.” (2)
This morning I am urging you to get out of the middle and take your place in the vineyard. I do not know exactly what God may be calling you to do, but I do know this: God is at work in the world today. God is at work in this church and God is at work in each of our lives doing a new thing. What really bothered the chief priests and the elders in our Gospel story was that they thought they had God and religion all figured out, and here comes this Jesus fellow with the message that God is doing a new thing!

Paul is well aware that God is doing a new thing. His life has been turned upside down by the power of the Gospel. Paul knows firsthand what God can do in a person’s life, and he is eager to have others experience that life-changing faith as well. Paul has put his whole self in, and he wants the church at Philippi, and the church in Cleveland Heights to do the same thing.

My friends, it’s time to heed our Lord’s call to go and work in the vineyard. Like the first son, we may have ignored or resisted or refused that call for a long time. Thank God we are able to change our minds and change our actions! Like the second son, we may have had good intentions, but have never got around to doing what we promised God we would do. My friends, it’s time to leave the middle and put our whole selves in. This morning’s sermon is a call to action. “Just do it!” says Nike. “Just do it!” says Jesus. Just follow where God leads.

Prayer: Dear God, we hear your call to go into the vineyard. Some of us have refused to go. Others of us have good intentions, but we have not gotten there. This day, may we respond to your call. Help us to put our whole selves into your service. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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