

Best Intentions

Romans 5: 1-8

Exodus 19: 2-8a

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Romans 5: 1-8

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Exodus 19:2-8

They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. The people all answered as one: "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.

It all began with some really good intentions. I had always wanted to learn to play the flute, but I never was quite motivated enough, or had time enough, to actually learn it. Around the time I became a hospice chaplain I met a local rabbi who was learning to play the guitar and she would practice while visiting her patients in a memory care unit, and would often play for other patients at their bedsides, and later at their memorial services. That was the perfect inspiration that I needed! If this was a wonderful way to visit with patients and support their loved ones, then I could do with the flute what she was doing with the guitar. I bought a flute and began to take private lessons. Sticking to a practice schedule was hard but I was motivated so I persisted—for awhile anyway. No matter how much I practiced, I could play notes, but not music. I happen to have just enough natural talent for making sounds, but not enough to ever come close to playing as I had hoped to achieve. I did get as far as playing a few flute/clarinet duets with my Mom, who encouraged my playing as pitiful as it was, partly because she was my Mom, and because she knew what I had hoped to accomplish. My son encouraged me with different songbooks, thinking that if I had music that I already enjoyed, I could also enjoy playing along with it. Their good intentions encouraged and supported my good intentions, but in

the end, I had developed a greater appreciation for those who could do what I only had wished that I could do.

We all have those experiences of good intentions. We get fantastic ideas, we get motivated to lose weight, or eat healthier, or become more active, or learn something new, or become involved in a social justice issue, but then the energy, the motivation, the inspiration fades. We struggle to get past just the good intentions so that what we do becomes a positive action, habit, and perhaps even a movement. It might be our work and home life balance, or financial limits, or we discover that the good intentions of our eyes are bigger than the stomachs that we have for the task. Our good intentions fall flat and are left behind.

These unsuccessful good intentions can happen just as easily, just as quickly, in our spiritual lives as well, and just as they happened for our faith ancestors.

As Moses was leading the freed Israelites through a physical and spiritual wilderness to the Promised Land, God tasked Moses with reminding them of God's guidance, faithfulness and promises. "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." When all the people heard God's words from Moses, in unison they replied, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do."

Freed from Pharaoh's bondage in Egypt and into a future as God's chosen people, the house of Jacob indeed had motivation, hope and guidance as they affirmed their good intentions to obey God, to keep the covenant. Yet in all the Scripture pages and passages and prophets that follow the announcement of their good intentions to honor the covenant and walk in God's ways, stories of those failed intentions are told. Good intentions fell to false gods, pagan gods, corrupt leadership, family strife, and political situations that made their efforts untenable.

In his letter to the Romans, and to us, Paul wrote that through Jesus we have received grace that we are justified by faith, and that we boast in that truth, even in times of distress, despair and suffering, as from that endurance, character, and hope are born within us. These are the marks of faith that inspire spiritual good intentions. What we intend to do through our faith, how we care for the gifts of God's creation, how we bear witness to speak out against injustice, and how we take a stand on issues that impact God's humanity, all begin with good intentions.

But we know that good intentions alone are not enough, they are simply the beginning. They can stall, and when they do, it is the same as doing nothing for the people, for the injustices, for the needs, that exist untouched or remain incomplete.

So what happens? How does inspiration peter out when such noble goals are sought out, prayed for, and planned for? How was it that the house of Jacob could not sustain the actions of their intentions in spite of God's promises and presence? How is that even in our ability to boast of our endurance, character and hope, we still fall short of what we sought to achieve through the peace of Jesus and God's love which has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit?

Poet William Arthur Ward offered some sage insight that we lose our initial confidence when we fear the risk of following through on our intentions. We bear the risk of appearing foolish, sentimental, or needing to give more involvement than we want to offer. Ultimately, we risk exposing feelings, dreams and our truest selves. We are vulnerable when we risk failing. "But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing."

There is an additional way of answering those questions as well. Alex Pattakos, co-author of *Prisoners of Our Thoughts*, says that, "Meaning is found in awareness of the moment, and

when we get too far from the moment we start to lose our effectiveness. Even when the stakes are high, and our success is essential, *focusing on the results rather than the process can actually get in the way of a successful outcome*. We all know how it works: our nervousness and anxiety about “getting it right” keep us from getting it right. The higher our expectations about something, the more disconnected we are from the actual accomplishment of it and the less able we are to participate in its successful unfolding.”

This is what happened in my failed attempt as a flutist- my sight was set on the end, the results, only, not on the journey, not on the process, so I got in my own way.

Friends, we are living now in a crucible, a season in which a deadly virus threatens, sickens and kills people around the world, and another virus long entrenched in our world, that of racism which threatens, sickens and kills people of color. This crucible, which holds these two forces interacting in our lives, will influence changes and lead to the creation of something new. In the midst of these viruses, good intentions will arise to heal them. Let us not fear the risk of appearing foolish, sentimental, or needing to give more involvement than we want to offer. Let us focus on the moment, on the process, so that our nervousness and anxiety about “getting it right” keep us from getting it right. The stakes are too high for our good intentions to not succeed.

We who are justified by faith, boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us to be the people God created and called us to be. Let us respond as one: “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Amen.