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 Our Saviour/St. Stephen's
 October 1, 2023
 Pentecost 18

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, there is a poem that haunts me.

It is a poem by a man named Primo Levi. Kind of an unusual name...Primo Levi.

The poem is called "On Trial" and it is about a man, named Alex Zink, who sits in the dock on trial...

The man is being questioned by the judge about his actions.

The poem reads thusly:

'My name? Alex Zink.' 'Where were you born?'

'Nuremberg, that illustrious ancient city.

Rightly famous, honest judge.

First, because certain laws were passed there

That are of no interest here.

(He is speaking of the antisemitic and racist laws enacted in Nazi Germany in 1935).

Second, for a debatable trial.

(He is referring to the Nuremberg trials at the end of World War II).

Third, because the best toys

In the whole world are produced there.'

(You see where his priorities lie.)

'Tell me, how have you lived,

And don't lie. It would be useless here.'

'I was hardworking, Your Honor.

Stone on top of stone, Deutsch *mark* after Deutsch *mark*.

I founded a model industry.

The best buckram, the finest felt

Were made by the Zink Company.

I was a humane and diligent boss:

Honest prices, generous salaries,

Never a complaint from my customers.
 And above all, as I was telling you,
 The best felt produced in Europe.'
 'Did you use good wool?'
 'Extraordinary wool, Your Honor.
 Loose or in braids,
 Wool of which I had the monopoly.
 Black wool and chestnut, tawny and blonde;
 More often gray or white.'
 'From what flocks?'
 'I don't know. It didn't interest me;
 I paid for it in cash.'
 'Tell me, have your dreams been tranquil?'
 'Usually, yes, judge.
 Though sometimes in my dreams
 I've heard grieving ghosts groan.'
 'Weaver, step down.'

PAUSE

Now, you need to know, Primo Levi the author of this poem was a holocaust survivor from the Auschwitz concentration camp.

And after his liberation from Auschwitz, Primo Levi became an author and poet.

And this particular poem Primo Levi wrote is about a man who bought wool, never questioning from where the wool came.

And as noted, this man, Alex Zink, is being judged for his indifference about the origin of the wool.

The poem is based on history, because if we didn't know, the Nazis shaved the heads of Jews, and the hair of those Jews would be used like wool from sheep to make fabrics and textiles.

How sick is that, right?

But, Primo Levi's point in the poem is that the buyer of this wool divorced himself from any commitment, divorced himself from any responsibility to humanity.

And so, the point Primo Levi is making is that the Nazi holocaust was able to go on for as long as did...

The Nazi holocaust was able to kill as many people as it did because people did not stop and ask questions? There was no commitment to their fellow Jewish brother and sister.

PAUSE

Now, when my wife and I went to Germany some years back, we visited a concentration camp in the town of Dachau.

And we were amazed to discover that the concentration was right there on the outskirts of the town, separated only by a wall.

And the question arose, "How could the German citizens not know what was going on right there in their backyard?"

Primo Levi's answer again, "Because the people did not stop and ask questions?" They were indifferent.

The people of Dachau also divorced themselves from any commitment to their human brother and sister.

And a terrible human tragedy known as the holocaust was the result, with six and half million people losing their lives.

Now, the story we have in our gospel reading today is not so different from that of the story in the poem I read.

Here Jesus is sharing another parable, and in this case it is a parable about a father who had two sons.

The father tells his sons to go and work in the vineyard.

The first son says, "No, I will not go," but eventually he changes his mind and goes.

The second son says, "I will go," but then never does.

And Jesus asks, "Which son did the will of the father?"

The first, because eventually this son goes into the vineyard to work.

And this parable then is interpreted by Jesus to refer to the present situation, where the tax collectors and prostitutes, who had lived in sin, listen to Jesus and believe in Jesus, and so they do God's will, acknowledging Jesus as God's son.

The chief priests and the elders, on the other hand, do not do the will of God, even though they would appear to have said they would do so (as exemplified in their call to religious work).

The chief priests and the elders, said they would do the will of God, and yet they do not, for they do not acknowledge Jesus as God's Son, and furthermore they do not have mercy and compassion for their fellow human beings.

This is Jesus' point.

And, like the poem by Primo Levi, it is a question about commitment, a commitment to one's brother and sister in the human family.

It is a question about one's commitment to humanity.

The religious elite, the chief priests and the elders, apparently did not get it.

The very people that should, like Jesus, be showing mercy, and compassion, and forgiveness, are the very people toward whom they show indifference.

The religious elite then do not do the will of God, for they have no commitment to humanity.

They are NOT committed to their neighbor in need. They are not committed to humanity.

PAUSE

Now, Paul, the apostle Paul, may have been the single most radical thinker when it comes to what it means to be committed to the brother and sister in the human family.

Paul may have been the single most radical thinker when it comes to what a commitment to humanity means.

For notice what Paul says in our reading from Philippians.

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves."

“Let each of you look NOT to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

“Regard others as better than yourselves.”

That is mind-blowing. That is unheard of. That is truly striking to say the least.

Alex Zink in the poem was concerned solely with his personal profit, what he could earn from the sale of his textiles.

He certainly did NOT think of the Jews as better than himself.

And the chief priests and the elders of Jesus’ day were concerned solely with their religious authority and power.

They certainly in no way thought of the tax collectors and prostitutes as better than themselves.

PAUSE

And so, the question begs to be asked, “What is our commitment to humanity in the present day?”

In these United States, we are told that “all people are created equal.”

But we in our society struggle just to get that right.

We, in this our society, often struggle to see other people as even the same as us, as worthy of having the same privileges, as worthy of having the same opportunities.

We struggle, our society struggles with equality.

But here Paul is telling us to see other people as better than ourselves.

Paul is telling us to look NOT to our own interests but to the interests of others.

That, my Friends, is commitment...that is what commitment to humanity looks like even today.

It is rejoicing not simply in equality.

No, Paul’s vision is one that rejoices in edification, building up the sister and brother, promoting the sister and brother, while at the same time not seeking our own advantage, or even considering our own interests and well-being.

It is hard even to imagine what that looks like.

And that is why Paul then tells us to look to Christ as the example.

In short, Paul encourages us to be of the same mindset as Christ.

For what does Christ do?

He, Christ, who was on equal status with God...

Equal status with the all-powerful God-head who made the entire cosmos.

This Christ did not exploit his divinity, his power, his status.

No, instead Jesus emptied himself, and became human, and even became lower than human, he became a slave, a servant.

And furthermore, unlike the examples in the parable, Jesus was obedient as a son of the Father...obedient to God's will perfectly, such that Jesus obeyed God's will whereby he (Jesus) died on the cross.

And, my Friends, this is Paul's example for us.

Paul tells us to look toward Christ to see what a life looks like an individual sees the other person as better than ourselves.

Jesus our Lord takes our place on the cross, and as such shows us that what it means to regards others as better than ourselves.

There (point to the cross) is what it looks like to put the interests of others before our own.

There (point to the cross) is what it looks like to see others as better than ourselves.

There (point to the cross) is where we see what paramount commitment to humanity, ultimate commitment to the brother and to the sister, looks like.

There we see no hemming and hawing on Jesus' part. There is THE example of doing the will of the Father.

PAUSE

In everyday life, the word that best summarizes all of this is the word "sacrifice."

And mind you, sacrifice does not necessarily have to mean putting one's self at risk of bodily harm, although it might.

But we also know that sacrifice can mean giving of our time and energy to help others.

And we also know that sacrifice can mean giving of our financial resources for others in need.

All the more, sacrifice means a radical commitment to humanity, like what Paul teaches us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Radical commitment to humanity means put the other person first and ourselves second.

And again, this is not easy to do.

In my own opinion, Paul's understanding of sacrifice may have had something to do with the notion of sacrifice in the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, a person offered the first fruits of the harvest, or the first, the best of the flock, to the Lord.

God received first from the blessings an individual enjoyed.

Paul transforms that so that the person receives first from us before we ourselves enjoy our blessings—and this then is how we honor God, this is how we sacrifice to God, by putting the neighbor first.

And this indeed does require us to stop and ask questions, like Primo Levi encourages us in his poem.

How must I serve humanity right now, even before tending to my needs?

Because I am committed to my human brother and sister, how am I called to care for them right now, even before caring for myself?

This is our sacrifice, Friends.

This is our sacrifice that is pleasing to our Lord.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.