Wanting to do the dishes

We’re preconditioned for self-gain and not for self-sacrifice. We need God’s help not only to do better but to want to do better.

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I’ve used it in a sermon before, but I never get tired of being reminded by Jennifer Aniston and Vince Vaughn that sometimes in a relationship motivation is more important than behavior. In a scene from *The Break Up*, after a dinner party, Aniston’s character goes into the kitchen to do dishes while Vaughn’s character sits on the couch, playing a video game. When she asks for help, he reluctantly agrees, but she’s not satisfied. Eventually, as the argument heats up, she says, “I want you to want to do the dishes!" to which he replies, “Why would I ever want to do dishes?” What makes it so good is that it’s so real:

It may not get much attention, but this Sunday we Episcopalians will pray a collect from the Book of Common Prayer that begs God to help us want to do the dishes—and everything else that God would want us to do: “Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord…”

If you strip away all of the Lenten theological code words, you’re left with an interesting statement of what we believe about God and about ourselves: “God, you alone can control our wills and desires: give us grace to love and desire what you want because only there will we find true joy.” That leads us to three powerful, scary, and radically countercultural truths that are central to the Christian faith.

First, we can’t help ourselves. We’ve prayed similar words before during Lent, and it’s the backbone of the Christian understanding of human nature. The issue is not a question of how hard we’re trying. Everywhere else in the world—home, school, work, friendships—we equate our efforts with success, but not when it comes to our relationship with God. We can’t make it better. In the eternal sense, in ways that matter beyond our day-to-day lives, we can’t make ourselves better.

Second, we can’t even want what’s best. Even more troubling (and liberating) is the truth that our desires are misaligned. This is what makes the first point so unavoidably true. If it were up to us, we’d practice the equivalent of staying up all night, eat ice cream, and never exercise. And, if you’re saying to yourself, “But I love exercising,” then you might be one of those people who, if left up to yourself, would do nothing but eat right, exercise, and pamper yourself to the detriment of those other relationships and pursuits that are important. It’s not the substance of the pursuits that matters. What matters, theologically speaking, is that we’re preconditioned to be in it for ourselves and not for others, for self-gain and not for self-sacrifice. We need God’s help not only to do better but to want to do better. It’s a damning diagnosis of ourselves, but it’s the first step toward getting better.

Finally, what God wants for us is a good, joyful, fruitful life. Usually, when preachers start talking about self-sacrifice, they want our money or our volunteer hours or our guilt-motivated “yes” when they ask for something. That’s what’s wrong with religion, but it’s not what’s wrong with God. God wants what is best for us, what is

joyful for us, what is fabulously satisfying in the long term for us. The ways of the world are ephemeral, varied, and illusive. Today's fad is tomorrow's reject is the next day's retro. God doesn't work like that. True joys are found in the one who sets us free from the guilt of trying to do what's right even though we don't even want to do what's right. Guilt cripples us. Grace liberates us. And God is in the grace business.

Give us grace, Almighty God, that we might want what you want—what is truly best for us—and empower us to pursue it. That's our prayer. That's our hope.

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