

What Are Your Intentions?  
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What are your intentions?

The question is at once confrontation and inquiry.

Just what are you up to?

What do you think you're doing?

A friend of mine brought her boyfriend home to meet her family. They had met while in the army, and this strong, master sergeant stood straight and tall in the living room when her father asked him "What are your intentions with my daughter, son?"

"I intend to marry her, sir, if she'll have me," he replied.

It was the correct answer.

Sometimes our intentions are not immediately clear to those around us. By asking "What are your intentions," to the person covered in sawdust in the woodshop, you may ascertain the purpose of the creation before you and better understand how it works.

Intentions can be arrayed in multiple layers as well. When a military commander has an intention of "winning the war," that strategy will get played out in a variety of individual but connected actions. There is an intention to claim a particular bit of real estate, to cut off the enemy's supply line, to pressure them to surrender.

Without clear intentions, and a plan, war is simply purposeless carnage. With intentions, it becomes violence with a purpose. It may still be carnage, but it is easier to sell to the people back home when you need to sell war bonds.

Today is the anniversary of the murder of Mahatma Gandhi, world renowned activist for justice and non-violent resistance. Born in the 1800s in India, he was educated in London, lived in South Africa, and eventually returned to India, where he led a national uprising to free that country from British rule.

That fight was long, and painful, and ugly. There was unrest in the streets, British soldiers brutalized the non-violent protestors, and the public outcry rained down from free nations around the world. I am sure that during those years, more than one person involved asked themselves “What is our intention here?” For the British soldiers, that answer was to put down the unwashed rabble of their colony, and for the Indian people it was to be free from British occupation and to rule themselves.

But as they say, when you’re up to your hips in alligators, it can be difficult to remember that your intention is to drain the swamp.

Our reading today was one of several interviews with people who were first-time protesters who participated in the uprising after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020.

I recommend that article to you. There will be a link to it in the printable version of this sermon available on our website later today.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/29/us/george-floyd-protest.html>

The experience of Tameka Stigers stood out to me in her frustration at the lack of meaningful change after the protests died down. “I don’t know, I’m very conflicted. Part of me, I don’t want people to stop showing up. But I don’t know what it changes. I mean, there are times when people go down to the St. Louis County Jail, and they march. And then they just, just go home. They go home.”

It can be challenging to keep at something when the goal seems so far off that it is impossible to achieve. It can be hard to cut that goal into bite-sized pieces that are more manageable, because we end up feeling like we’re never going to reach the finish line.

Gandhi spoke to this frustration when he said “It’s the action, not the fruit of the action, that’s important. You have to do the right thing. It may not be in your power, may not be in your time, that there’ll be any fruit. But that

doesn't mean you stop doing the right thing. You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result.”

And still, always focusing on the process without ever seeing significant progress can wear thin.

Sometimes the fight seems overwhelming and unfair – like the Hebrew story of David and Goliath. In that story, the armies of the Israelites and the Philistines were in a standoff, camped on opposite sides of a valley. Goliath was a giant Philistine warrior who challenged the Israelites to send out a champion to fight him. Whichever warrior won would represent their whole army and claim victory over the whole other army. King Saul had an entire army at his disposal, but none of the Israelites was particularly keen to face this guy down, but a young shepherd named David volunteered to go. Armed with his walking staff, a sling, and a handful of rocks, he stepped out onto the plain to face Goliath.

Goliath laughed at the diminutive and youthful David and called down curses from all his gods upon the boy. David did not waver and had faith that is god would help him prevail. As the giant charged, David fitted a stone into his slingshot and aimed, striking Goliath in the head and knocking him flat. The Israelites won the battle, and the Philistines were vanquished. It is the ultimate story of the little guy winning against the big, powerful oppressor.

Rarely do such examples present themselves in our modern era. Much as we like the idea of upstart underdogs winning against unspeakable odds, those victories don't happen that often. The odds are simply against it. Superior strength and resources usually won over a claim to some moral high ground.

In our geopolitical global reality today, Vladimir Putin's Russia seems to be playing the role of Goliath and the Philistines. For whatever reason, King Saul, played by the United States, seems reluctant to engage with this fearsome foe as it engages in saber-rattling, and chest-thumping displays

of its military might, threatening to invade Ukraine, and most recently, planning to exercise war games off the coast of Ireland right at the beginning of the fishing season for mackerel and prawns.

Have you been watching this story? About the Irish fishermen?

For those who are unfamiliar, Russia announced last week that it planned to conduct live-fire war games in the waters just off Ireland. While those waters periodically get used for such things, Russia's plans out additional pressure on global tension around that nation's growing aggressive imperialism.

Nobody seems eager to step onto the field between the globe's two superpowers and take on the bully.

Enter a guy named Patrick Murphy and his cohort of Irish fishermen. Murphy is the head of the association of fishermen in that part of Ireland, and he and his colleagues were unimpressed with Russia's plans to muck up their fishing season.

While diplomats and envoys and ambassadors held urgent conversations in embassies and on secure lines, Patrick Murphy and his friends simply declared that Russia could bugger off out of their fishing grounds and that they would not yield to the military vessels.

That's right. This little cohort of several dozen fishermen in their trawlers and long-netters simply refused to be muscled out of their livelihood by some foreign potentate's need to compensate for some personal shortcoming by bullying the world.

Putin's intentions were clear: to exert his power and rub the free world's nose in it.

The Irish fishermen's intentions were equally clear:

"Pfft. Get out! Its fishing season and you're in our way!"

Murphy and his leadership were invited to the Russian embassy for talks, after which the Russians said they never promised anything, even though Murphy said they had promised to not bother the fishermen.

Journalists from around the world suddenly learned a great deal about Cork, Ireland and the temperament of the fishermen there. "Aren't you

concerned?” They asked. “Of course we’re concerned. But we’re not backing down. We’re protesting. Our protest is that we’re not leaving.”

“What are you trying to do?!?!” The world press said to the fishermen, translating roughly into “Have you lost your minds?”

“We’re planning to earn our livelihoods,” they answered.

Those of us who claim Ireland in our genetic heritage hold dear the often-irrational hard-headedness of the people who live on that island nation. During a crossover between MSNBC news hosts Rachel Maddow and Lawrence O’Donnell this week, O’Donnell remarked about growing up in Boston’s Irish stronghold of Dorchester and said that what Putin and the rest of the world might not understand, is that when a Murphy says they’re not going to go away, they’re not moving. Period.

He mused at the possible conversations being had at the embassy and with other leaders trying to explain to the Russians what it meant for a Murphy to make such a clear statement of defiance. He figured that eventually, if the Russians wouldn’t listen to reason, they’d run into Murphy and finally understand. “Good luck with the Murphy’s,” he said, with the kind of laugh that means he knew well what that outcome would be, and that the Russians would not like it one bit.

Yesterday evening, the Russian embassy announced that the military war games conducted by their navy would be moved further off the Irish coast to not interfere with the Irish fishermen and their mackerel and prawns.

There is a lot of conversation to be had as to why exactly it fell to a bunch of annoyed fishermen from a wee island nation to stand up to Goliath and make him back down. But that is not for me to try to figure out today. The story here, of course, is that, armed with clear intentions, a strong chin, and faith in their own cause, this bunch of fishermen played David to Vladimir Putin’s Goliath and won.

David doesn’t always win. He doesn’t win much of the time at all. But every now and then, the progress of righteousness does make itself clear for the world to see, and it is a glorious thing to behold.

I leave you with these words from Dorothy Day:

People say, what is the sense of our small effort.

They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.

A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.

No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless.

There is too much work to do.

May we live into our intentions today, tomorrow, and always.

Amen.