

Sunday, October 1, 2023
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21A)

Matthew 21.23-32

St. Gregory's, Long Beach

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1687118435031337>

(Sermon begins at about 23:35)

“Avoiding a World of Hurt”

Today's Gospel reading, particularly the parable about the two sons, is one of those stories that I can't help but chuckle when I hear it. Not that it's humorous. Quite the contrary. It's just that I can't help but think of what would have happened had I ever responded either way to my own father. With either response, I would have been in a world of hurt. If I had, like the first son, refused to do what my father demanded, I would have been in a world of hurt for defying him. If I had, like the second son, said I would do what my father asked and then failed to follow through, I would have likewise been in a world of hurt, just delayed. But this is exactly why Jesus tells this parable, particularly to the chief priests and elders of the temple. To let them know they were in a world of hurt. Only not with their own fathers, but with their heavenly Father.

To more fully appreciate what is going on, we need to step back a little and look at the context for the exchange in today's Gospel reading. To look at how Jesus got here and what prompted the confrontation between him and the chief priests and elders in the first place.

Jesus has just made his triumphal entry to Jerusalem on what we now refer to as Palm Sunday. After the joyous reception by his followers, he immediately goes to the temple and proceeds to turn things upside down. Literally and figuratively. He starts off his visit to the temple by driving out the vendors selling animals for ritual sacrifice and by overturning the tables of the money changers, proclaiming “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers’” (Mt 21.13). Condemning the mistaken ideas that have developed about the ministry of the temple—the place that is meant to represent God's home and, by extension, the work that is of most concern to God. Not a place of commerce. Corrupt commerce, at that. He then sets to work on the real ministry, the real work, that God desires. Not symbolic sacrifices, but the care of God's beloved children. He spends the rest of the day healing all who came to him seeking to be cured of their ailments and infirmities.

The next day—where we pick up in today's Gospel—Jesus returns to the temple and is immediately confronted by the chief priests and elders, questioning “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” These two questions are designed to trap Jesus. Up until now, the authorities, concerned and frustrated by Jesus' growing popularity and authority among the people—popularity and authority that detracts from their own—have been looking for a way to get rid of him. Given his claims about himself as the Messiah and the Son of God, charges of blasphemy would be the cleanest way of getting rid of him. All they need to do is to get him to make such claims directly to them. Open and shut case. Hence the twofold question.

But Jesus is on to them. So he devises a question of his own about the authority of John the Baptist. Was it of divine origin or of human origin? Here, the tables are reversed. The temple authorities are on to what Jesus is trying to do. Trying to entrap them. If they say that John's authority was divine, then they could be accused of hypocrisy or worse for not believing what John preached. For not partaking in the baptism of repentance that John practiced. But if they say that John acted on his own volition, by human as opposed to divine authority, they risk incurring the wrath of the people, who viewed John as a prophet. No matter how they answer, they are in for a world of hurt. Hence, their response: "We do not know." To which Jesus rightly responds, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." Stalemate?

Not really. Jesus has avoided providing evidence that would substantiate the temple authorities' desired charges of blasphemy. And, in fact, he has revealed that their own authority is a house of cards. The response of the chief priests and elders—or lack thereof—reveals the true intent of the exercise of their duties. Or lack thereof. They are more concerned with appearances than they are with the truth. They are more concerned with taking care of themselves and holding on to their power than they are with taking care of the wellbeing of the people.

While Jesus has successfully avoided charges of blasphemy and, in so doing, revealed the true nature of the chief priests and elders, he is not just going to walk away. He is going to make sure that all those present understand just how hypocritical the temple authorities really are. How they have not been faithfully following God's will. So, Jesus devises a clever parable about the two sons, meant to reveal how the temple authorities have played fast and loose with their interpretations of the God's demands. The first son refusing to do as his father demanded, but ultimately following through; and the second saying he will do as his father demanded, but ultimately failing to do so. And asking the chief priests and elders to render judgement—which they are always so quick to do anyway—as to which son, despite appearances, was truly faithful.

The chief priests and elders rightly indicate that it was the first son, the one who initially refused to do the will of his father but ultimately complied, is the one who is faithful. Yet, in responding truthfully, the temple authorities only serve to further condemn themselves. In their answer, they, by extension, associate themselves—albeit unintentionally—with the second son who said he would do the father's will but then does not. Jesus has masterfully pointed out in a very subtle way that the chief priests and elders have taken vows to follow God's will, but, in actuality, have not done so. Sadly, they probably don't even realize that they have condemned themselves. What is the term Jesus repeatedly uses for the temple authorities? Hypocrites?

This exchange, and particularly the parable about the two sons, is about so much more than challenges of authority. Be it Jesus' authority or that of the chief priests and elders. It is really about faithfully living according to God's desires for us. It is a recognition that we can and often do fall short of those desires. Despite our own best intentions. Recognition that the journey of faith is one of continually struggling to be faithful. It is one of continually taking two steps forward and one step back. Of falling down and having to pick ourselves up and continuing on.

This is implied in the actions of the first son. Or rather, in his motivation. We are told that he “changed his mind.” The Greek word used literally means “to change one’s cares” or “to feel remorse” or “to regret.”¹ Having the same root as the word John the Baptist used in his preaching about repentance and performing baptism as a means to and sign of repentance. See what Jesus did there? Subtly referring back to his previous question to the chief priests and elders regarding the John the Baptist’s authority. And in his choice of words, not so subtly pointing out their own unwillingness to repent of the ways in which they had acted contrary to God’s will. Of their own unwillingness to turn around and return to faithful adherence to God’s commandments. Jesus further emphasizes this by using the example of prostitutes and tax collectors. Those who are viewed as being sinful by their very being, as well as actions. Yet, it was the prostitutes and tax collectors, condemned by the temple authorities, who, through Jesus, experienced the love of God. And as a result, turned their lives around to live more in accordance with God’s ways. A subtle—or maybe not-so-subtle—slap in the face of the temple authorities. Those who thought they were the model of faithful living, whereas it is really the likes of prostitutes and tax collectors who are truly in touch with who they are, who are willing to repent, to turn around, and thereby become models of faithful living.

If you were to boil today’s Gospel reading down to one sentence, one principle, it is ultimately that our lives of faith are about what we do, not what we say—or what we say we are going to do. Jesus demonstrates this time and again throughout his own ministry. Yes, he preaches and teaches using words. But some of his greatest teachings, some of his most profound messages, are not conveyed through words, but rather through his actions. Certainly through the many healings that he performed, as well as the other ways he showed compassion and mercy for those who came to him in need.

Of course, the ultimate expression of Jesus’ teachings, the ultimate demonstration of his love and compassion, is unfolding before us in the Gospel. In where Jesus finds himself, both physically, as well as in the context of his life and ministry. He is in Jerusalem, mere days from his crucifixion. An event that, in the moment, seemed a tragic miscarriage of justice. But within a few days, would prove to be a life-changing event. Not just for Jesus, but for all who follow him and for all who would come to follow him. For through his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus provided the ultimate expression of love, compassion, and mercy for humanity: breaking the bonds of sin and death, opening the way to forgiveness and eternal life for all. Events and actions that literally avoid the potential world of hurt of our own making and welcoming us into the world of God’s unbounded grace.

Today’s Gospel reading also provides us with a model for how we are to live our faith. Of how we are to respond to the expression of love, compassion, and mercy Jesus provides through his life and ministry, as well as through his death and resurrection. That being the model of the first son. Who, while flawed and imperfect, was able, upon reflection, to recognize the need to repent and turn his life around. The one who sought the path of humble obedience to his father. The path that avoids the world of hurt that comes with disobedience to the Father’s will, and leads to new life.

¹ “Is God with Us? SALT’s Commentary for Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost,” SALT, September 25, 2023. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/9/21/is-god-with-us-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-seventeenth-week-after-pentecost>.