

Sunday, September 27, 2026
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21A)
Matthew 21.23-32
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Transformed”

At first glance, there seems to be a disconnect between the two distinct portions of today’s Gospel reading. We start off with the temple leaders questioning Jesus’ actions: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” After a little back and forth which ultimately puts the temple leaders in a no-win situation—as only he can do—Jesus then tells a parable about two contrarian sons. One who refuses to do what his father asks but ends up doing it anyway, and one who agrees to what his father asks but then fails to follow through.

What does this parable about two contrarian sons have to do with questions about Jesus’ authority? Are we missing something? Are the questions of authority and Jesus telling a parable even connected. After all, sometimes, the writers of the Gospel—or rather, the redactors, the editors—do occasionally make abrupt shifts with no transition, no explanation. Well, that is not the case here. The parable is indeed part of the broader conversation about Jesus’ authority. Is part of a broader, albeit implied, conversation about living as God would have us do.

We first need to take a step back and look at the broader context of this conversation between Jesus and the temple leaders. We are told that “When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’” What things are they referring to? His entering the temple? His teaching? Well, yes, of course. I would certainly question someone who entered this place uninvited and started teaching. But there is more to it than that. Much more. To set the stage, this scene takes place on what we now refer to as Monday in Holy Week. The day before, Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Mt 21.9). Arriving in a manner befitting a king. In a manner that left the whole city in turmoil (Mt 21.10). He then immediately went to the temple “and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves . . . [saying] ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers’” (Mt 21.12-13).

So, you can see why the temple leaders were a bit confrontational. In the last 24 hours Jesus has entered the most holy city in Israel, the religious and political center of the nation, in a procession fit for a king. Then he goes to the temple and disrupts the critical sacrifice supply chain operation. And now he is teaching in the temple. The temple leaders are right to be suspicious. They are right to question “by what authority” Jesus is acting. From their perspective, anyway.

In true Jesus-style, he does not merely answer the temple leaders’ questions. He realizes that if he publicly declares his authority to be of divine origin, the temple leaders’ case for blasphemy, at least, according to their laws, will be open and shut. He needs to sidestep the trap they have set for him by laying a trap of his own. One that answers the question, even if indirectly. So, he systematically leads them through a discussion about the meaning of divine authority and how

that authority is demonstrated. Rather than focus on himself, Jesus uses the example of John and his practice of baptism. When Jesus turns the question of authority back on the temple leaders, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” the temple leaders are unable to give an adequate answer. After all, when it comes to authority, there is the source of the authority—in this case, God—and there are the ability and willingness of others to accept that authority—in this case, the people. Realizing they are venturing into dangerous waters, the temple leaders respond, “We do not know.” Perhaps a cop out, but also containing an element of truth. For they do not seem to truly understand how the authority of God works in practice. In answering correctly, the temple leaders succeed in condemning themselves for not doing God’s will. Betraying the underlying hypocrisy that Jesus has been calling out for three years. They may say the right words as presented in Scripture, but do not always follow through with their actions. In short, right words, wrong actions.

Which leads to the parable about the vineyard owner’s sons. Jesus senses that the temple leaders still do not truly understand the meaning of divine authority, of what it means to follow and to truly live into and in accordance with divine authority. So, when in doubt, when you need to convey a lesson that your audience does not necessarily want to hear, tell a parable.

As we heard, the vineyard owner asks one of his sons to go work in the vineyard. He refuses. I don’t know about you, but if I had refused such a request from my father, the story would have been over. Or he would have changed my mind for me. At any rate, the man, refused by the first son, asks his other son to go work in the vineyard. He agrees to go but ultimately fails to follow through. In the meantime, the first son has, as we are told, “changed his mind and went.” Which leads to Jesus’ question to the temple leaders, “which of the two did the will of his father?” The correct answer being the first—the one who initially said no, but then changed his mind. Here, the reverse of what the temple leaders did. Here, wrong words, right action.

The key to the whole story is in the fact that the first son changed his mind. The word for “change of mind” Jesus uses is *metamelomai*—similar to the concept of *metanoia* we have discussed before. Both terms carry the meaning of changing one’s mind and turning one’s life around. In this parable, the word used, *metamelomai*, literally meaning “to change one’s cares,” or “to feel remorse,” or “to regret.” Not just being about repentance and changing one’s mind as with *metanoia*, but carrying the added layer of motivation for the change. The desire to change out of sorrow, remorse, and regret.

As such, this parable is not just a simple contrast between the two sons and their respective courses of actions. This parable is not just about the difference between words and actions, between “talking the talk” and “walking the walk.” The key in all of this is in the fact that the first son changed his mind. He was sorrowful, remorseful, regretful, for having not done what his father asked of him, of what his father needed him to do, possibly even of the faith that his father had placed in him in the initial asking. There was a transformation for the first son. The second son, on the other hand, while changing his mind—saying yes and then not following through—was not transformed. In their initial actions, neither of the sons did as asked. Neither initially went to the vineyard when asked. The difference is the first one, sorrowful, remorseful, regretful, for his actions, was transformed. The sorrow, remorse, and regret—the pain he caused his father in initially refusing his wishes—proved to be a transformational experience for him. Allowing him to “change his cares”—to shift his focus from his own selfish desires to focus

on the will of his father. Allowing him to change his mind and be able to do what his father asked of him, despite his initial recalcitrance.

Jesus concludes with a zinger aimed at the temple leaders: “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” In other words, the temple authorities have become locked into a rigid way of thinking. They think they have all the answers. They think they know what God wants of them. Well, they do know what God wants. The problem is, they do not always do what God truly wants. They do not always follow through. Meanwhile, Jesus lifts up the example of those who are considered sinful and, in the minds of the temple leaders, beyond redemption. And yet, it was those sinners, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, and others like them, who were able to hear John’s message of repentance, were able to experience God’s love, and were then able to experience transformation. To experience “change of mind,” “change of cares,” “change of life.”

While concluding with a zinger aimed at the temple leaders, Jesus does not slam the door on them and their own potential for transformation. If anything, this parable of the two contrarian sons and the resulting zinger aimed at the temple leaders is actually an invitation. Jesus leaves the door open. That just as the tax collectors and the prostitutes, and so many others viewed as sinners by the temple leaders, through sorrow, remorse, and regret, have been transformed, so too can the temple leaders be transformed.

And so, too, can we be transformed. As one commentator summarizes this passage, particularly as applicable to us:

This passage is also a reminder of the central role “change of mind” plays in Christian life: both *metanoia*, “change of mind” or “change of heart” or “change of life”; and *metamelomai*, “change of cares” or “remorse” or “regret.” If we have ears to hear, we can receive the parable as if it’s addressed directly to us: what change of mind is God calling us to? What pang of regret may help us chart a new way forward? How is God challenging us to “change our cares,” to reset our priorities, to rearrange what most concerns us?¹

When it comes to following God’s will, to living as God would have us do, we have a choice. We can choose what we want to do or we can have a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of cares, a change of life, and be transformed into who God is calling us to be. This is not a one-time only offer. Through his death and resurrection that occurred just days following his encounter with the temple leaders in today’s passage, Jesus offers us an ongoing, permanent invitation to be transformed and to follow him. Recognizing that at times we will fall short. And when we realize we do, Jesus will be there to gently and lovingly help us in our transformation and to get back on track.

¹ Is God with Us? SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost,” SALT, September 20, 2026. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/9/21/is-god-with-us-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-seventeenth-week-after-pentecost>.