

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 21 – Year A – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony - 9.27.20

Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32, Psalm 25:1-8, Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 21:23-32

Jesus spoke to his followers in parables, short, attention grabbing stories that helped them to see God and the way that God wanted to be with them. The parables were designed to cause the hearers to think about themselves, their community and most importantly the radical way of living that Jesus was inviting them to embrace. The parables continue to do these very things, from second century Palestine to 21st century America. Because the parables were set in the context in which they were told, some need a bit of translation and recontextualization. Others are readily understandable just as they are told. It seems to me that the story that is our Gospel, needs little in the way of updating for us to understand.

Who among us has not been each of the characters in this story. A parent, and it could be father or mother, asks a child, son or daughter, to do something. In this case to go into the vineyard to work. The work was something of benefit the whole family. Farming, and cultivation of grapes provided, wine, food, and livelihood for the whole family and each person had a part to play. It was not an idle request. Have you ever had the experience of asking someone to do something that was important to you and had them respond as one of the two children in this parable? Either to say yes they would do so and not do it or to say no they would not do so and then later do what was asked? In your family, your workplace, your community or in the political arena has this ever happened to you?

Exploring further, have you ever agreed to do something and then not done so, or on the other hand, refused to do something and later, changed your mind and done it? Few of us in our lives have not at one time or another been all three of the people of this parable.

The context of the parable within the earthly ministry of Jesus is important as well. Jesus moved around Galilee and Judah, finally coming to Jerusalem during the festival of Passover, that most important of all Jewish celebrations. It was the time of the year when the Romans most feared an uprising. The most tense time of the year.

The action takes place early in the final week of Jesus life. Jesus is teaching in the temple, a most sacred and holy place, the heart of the religion of the Jews. Those in power in the temple, the chief priests and elders come to Jesus with a question of authority. By what right is he teaching these things? The chief priests and elders see Jesus as a challenge to their power and a danger to the uneasy peace with the Romans. They are seeking to catch Jesus in an offense against the religious and secular law. It is an anxious moment, one in which the powerful religious leaders are challenged yet again. They are like the first child in the parable that Jesus will tell. They agree to do the will of God then by insisting on their own will they do not do so. They ask the question about authority, where it comes from. Their authority comes from the interpretation of the religious rules and the human power that such rules give them. Jesus' authority comes from God. With his answer to their question, Jesus confounds the religious leaders, and gathering his followers around him, tells this parable, asking the question: "Which of these two did the will of his father." Clearly, it is not the chief priests and elders who Jesus views as doing the will of God. Jesus was about one thing above all else in the metaphorical vineyard of the Palestine of his day. That one thing was doing the will of his Father, God. It is on that alone that Jesus derived authority.

This is a parable about three things: freedom, repentance and grace. They are all connected, tied together in the matter of God's will for our lives. First it is about the freedom to believe, believe that God sent the Messiah into the world to save the world and all of those who by their belief accept that salvation. Salvation is not by works, be they physical, intellectual, moral or spiritual, salvation is by faith. This was very good news for those who were the tax collectors, widows, poor, and the powerless. It was not such good news for those who thought they could earn their way into God's kingdom. Salvation by faith alone lies the heart of the freedom to which this parable points.

Each of the children in the parable had the freedom to choose to do the will of the father. Alternatively, each had the freedom to do as the chief priests and elders were doing, relying on their own interpretation of the rules, their own human power. Each child had the freedom to choose a change in behavior. The one who gave lip service to obedience and then did not go to the vineyard had only seemingly done the will of the father. The one who refused initially and then went is the one who has had a change of heart, the one who repented. In that repentance that the second child not only did the father's will but gained the father's grace. Repentance and change are the human actions that make us ready to receive the grace of a new heart and a new spirit.

Centuries ago, God put this message in the words of the prophet Ezekiel. "Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine". All lives are God's whether the person acknowledges the truth of this or not. All lives belong to the Holy One who created life. Your life and my life belong to God. It is this unbreakable bond between human life and God that is the source of our salvation. We cannot earn it, salvation is ours as a gift. Yet, like all gifts, we can either accept it gratefully or reject it.

Again, the words of God through the prophet Ezekiel: "Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!" A new heart and a new spirit!

That is what God desires for us. A new heart and a new spirit is what Jesus was offering the crowds that gathered around him to hear his words. Those gathered heard the parable not as a story about two children and their parent, but about God and human beings. About God and every human being, about God and us, about God and God's grace.

The third component of this parable is grace. Grace is that elusive attribute of God on which so much of our spiritual life depends. Grace in the end can only be described by someone who has experienced it. I think of the words of John Newton, the slave trader who was the author of the hymn Amazing Grace. Newton was brought by grace to see that slavery was evil and changed his life. "Twas grace that taught my heart to hear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!"

Jesus insists that the tax collectors and harlots will go into God's kingdom before the righteous Pharisees and elders. In the words of one of my favorite theologians; "It is not that those disreputable types will be saved because they straightened up and flew right; it is that they will be saved just because they believed." Like Newton, they have experienced grace. It is not that the Pharisees and elders; "... took a nosedive into evil works after a previously respectable flight pattern." They do not see the grace offered to them because they have more faith in their own ability to live according to the religious rules than they have in God's grace. It is not a matter of morality which break down into the rules we humans

make to enable us to live together. It is a matter of the way in which God works in the world. It is faith and not rules that enables grace.

This is a parable about freedom, repentance and grace. The freedom to choose to do the will of God or not; the ability to repent of that which is not of God; and the assurance of God's grace, unearned but always available. It is a parable of a new heart and new spirit which God is offering to us.