

Pentecost 17A September 27 2020
Matthew 21:23-32
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

When he [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, and who gave you this authority?" Let's pray:

You've gotta' love Jesus' sass; his passive-aggressive way of turning the tables on those who seek to undermine him. The chief priests and elders try to snare Jesus in blasphemy by asking him about the basis of his authority, and he answers with a question, that to answer, puts them in an untenable situation whichever way they go. Jesus is a fox, a rebel, a bad boy who refuses to entertain their feeble attempts. Jesus knows that he can't prove his authority to the religious leaders; his unique claim to authority is based simply on who he is.

As far as Jesus is concerned, only two things matter in his ministry, then, now, and forevermore – his authority (*ἐξουσία*) as who he is and people's faith (*πίστις*) or lack of it, in him, personally. Jesus refuses to get bogged down in arguments to prove his credentials; he simply invites people to believe. This is the hard to swallow bit of his Good News: salvation is not by works; *salvation is strictly and only by faith in him*. Jesus simply stands before us in the fullness of his *ἐξουσία* and dares us to believe. Consequently, this brings us to the parable:

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?"

Question: On which son will judgement fall?

Answer: On the second.

Question: Why?

Answer: Because he didn't obey his father.

Question: What is the father's will?

Answer: *"This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son [standing, looking, speaking, and hanging on the cross] and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day"* (John 6:40).

The point of this parable is that judgement falls on unfaith alone. Jesus highlights this by asserting that the tax collectors and prostitutes will jump the queue into heaven before the religious rulers. It's not that those of ill repute will be saved because they straightened themselves out; they will be saved simply because they believe. And it's not that the rulers will for some reason descend into evil; they're judged for not repenting of their lack of faith in Jesus. They refuse to accept the grace of God who works salvation by raising the dead.

The religious leaders were good people and as far as the tax collectors and the prostitutes go, they had more strikes against them than a horseshoe on a blacksmith's anvil. They were bad people, losers, outcasts, social pariahs.

If you scratch beneath the surface of the parable of the two sons, all of this is revealed. The "repentance" of the first son doesn't remove the fact that he disobeyed his father by initially refusing to work. The skiving of the second son doesn't undo his father's joy at his initial intention. The first son's no remains an insult and the second son's yes stands as an unalterable joy. But, in the end, one son decides to trust in his father's authority and grace while the other in fact rejects it.

In fact, if you want to push the boundaries of this parable, you could say that the second son was fully aware of his father's graciousness in accepting his brother's too-easy repentance after insubordination, and

decides to teach his father a lesson. He shows everyone who's boss by letting the air out of the tires of all this freedom-in-faith nonsense, by not showing up. They thought they could rely on him, hey? Well, they'd be sorry.

Now, let's get dangerous and expand this parable into the life of the church.

The reality is, no matter how much we say we understand free grace and dying love, *we really don't like it*. It's too indiscriminate. It lets drunks, addicts, crooks, and jezebels into the kingdom. What a gall! And for no more reason than the Gospel's shabby proclamation of blind trust over worthy works. Such heartless, immoral twaddle, we mutter to ourselves. We'll show God, won't we. We'll continue to sing *Amazing Grace* in church, but we'll be jolly well pious when it comes to explaining to the riffraff what it actually means. Of course, we'll assure them that God loves them and forgives them, but we'll make it clear that *we* expect them to clean up their act before *we* embrace them as family. We don't want prostitutes, junkies, and shysters thinking they can just waltz in here and join the party. And we definitely don't want philandering pastors standing up in the pulpit telling us that God forgives such impudence because *we've* never done such things.

Do you get it, now? We're the second sons, elder brothers, respectable chief priests and elders, all-day labourers whose moral highbrowing has been trampled on by the Beautiful Feet of the Gospel. We're not happy with being the punchline of the divine joke of grace that says nothing matters except plain old, "Yes, Jesus" faith. And when we silo our objections by giving people the impression that the church isn't for sinners, we shove the Light of the gospel under our bushel of works. Like the second son, our only real trust is in thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent sinners like ourselves. Just trusting Jesus – the friend of tax collectors and prostitutes, the one who, while we were dead to God through our sins, died for the ungodly – is not our idea of how to run a tight ship.

St Augustine declared to God, "I will distrust myself, I will trust in you." The first son had the grace to distrust his own position in his relationship

with his father, eat humble pie, and turn his selfish no into an other-focussed, yes of faith. In so doing, he is commended as having done the will of his father. And the will of his father is one and only one thing: believing. God's will boils down to trusting in him – anytime, anywhere, anyhow.

However, the second son turned St Augustine's prayer around: "I will trust myself, I will distrust you." He kept a tally where his father kept none, a ledger where his father had stopped making entries, and for his reliance on works (vindictive, negative, I'll-teach-them-a-lesson works), he is condemned.

Saints, it's as simple as it is real. Father God's will for you – his whole will, his entire plan of salvation is... that you believe in Jesus. That's it. Nothing more. Our Father has already forgiven you; he has already reconciled you, and he has already raised you up together with Jesus and plonked you down in heaven with him. And he has done this because Jesus himself has already declared with great acclamation, that you have done his Father's will, by believing in him.

But if you don't believe him – if you insist on dragging yourself up to the Magistrate's bar on your own faithless feet to argue a case he has already dismissed; you will never hear the silence of his non-condemnation over the din of your own voice. "He who argues his own case has a fool for a lawyer" is true in any courtroom. In this courtroom there is no case to answer, there is no evidence against you; in fact, there's not even a courtroom to argue your case in. It's all quashed, it's been dismissed, it's all over except for the fun of having an eternal drink with Judge Jesus. All you have to do is raise your glass and say, "Yes, Jesus. Cheers! Skal! Salute! Prost! Bottoms up!" You see, Jesus stands everything on its head and the last shall be first, just for believing in him. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.