

"The Parables According to Matthew, Part 9, "Sons"  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for August 13<sup>th</sup> 2017 (Tenth Sunday after Pentecost)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 21: 28-32

Perhaps the first thing...perhaps the very first thing that ought to be noted vis a vis this morning's parable, is that it represents the first parable we find in Matthew, **after** Jesus has entered Jerusalem, after his entrance to the Temple, his cleansing of the Temple. Moreover: it's the parable Jesus tells immediately following the challenge offered to Jesus by the Chief Priests and elders after he returns to the Temple, the day after his dramatic cleansing of it. For that reason, it's not at all surprising that this parable—unique to Matthew's Gospel—has something of an edge, is—in fact—somewhat confrontational. Also worth noting...

...before we take a closer look at the element that gives this parable its edge, it's confrontational quality...

...also worth noting is that the text—the five verses to which we just listened—contains within it more than the parable itself. If we are going to be technical—and this morning that may be worth doing—the parable itself only occupies roughly the first half of the reading as we heard it this morning.

*"What do you think?" asks Jesus to those who have gathered round. "What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, "So, go and work in the vineyard today" And he answered, "I will not", but afterward he changed his mind and went. And the man then went to the other son and said the same. And he answered: "I go, sir," but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?"*

Technically speaking, that's the parable. But since the parable takes the form of a question, it's not surprising that our reading includes the very brief answer provided to the question, presumably by the chief priests and elders who have been giving Jesus a hard time. *"They said, "The first'."* That's the second part of our text, quickly followed by Jesus' response to their answer.

*Jesus said to them: "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before 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 even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him."*

That's the third and final portion of this morning's text: and, without denying its importance, I want to begin by putting that final portion to one side, so that we don't fall into the trap of confusing the parable itself, with the further remarks Jesus makes in the aftermath of having told the parable. Let's focus on the parable...brief though it may be:

because it's a parable that is deceptively straightforward...and yet one which is very much directed at folks like us. Let's hear it again.

*“What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said: ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And the son answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And this second son answered, I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?”* And yes: hopefully...hopefully we'll give the correct answer to this parable, a parable that takes the form of a riddle: hopefully we'll respond to the riddle with the same answer provided by Jesus' first audience. They correctly identified the first son—the one who said “no” but then changed his mind and did as the father requested—they correctly identified the first son as the one who did the will of the father, rather than the son who says yes but then sits on his hands. That's the answer they gave...if we're paying attention that's the answer we'll provide as well...and, yes, that's the correct answer! But that's where, or so it seems to me, all of this becomes terribly...terribly complicated.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's not difficult, I think...not difficult to see how well this parable fits within the context in which we find it in Matthew's Gospel. Christ's ministry, at this point, has entered a new—and extraordinarily—challenging phase, one in which he seems to be taking on at least some elements of the religious establishment. And so this parable, which implicitly suggests that the religious leaders are more like the second son...

...the one who says yes but fails to put that yes into action...

...not hard to see how appropriate this parable is in its present context...nor is it hard to imagine why this parable would not have won Jesus many friends in high places. Nor for that matter...

...nor for that matter is it hard to grasp why this parable would have been cherished by the early church: an early church that was mainly comprised of gentiles (non-Jews), in the aftermath of the general rejection of the Gospel by the bulk of the Jewish people. Heard in that context, this parable likely resonated with its suggestion that the insiders, the chosen ones, were like the second son who knew how to say “yes” to God the Father, but walked away...whereas the gentiles were proving to be more like the first son, whose initial impulse—when given the opportunity to follow the One God—was to say no, but who then came to embrace and to live out the Gospel. Not hard to see how this parable works within those two contexts: the context of Jesus own life, and the context of the mainly Gentile church that took shape over the subsequent 30 or 40 years. So far so good...although it obviously begs the really big question: how does this parable function...how ought this parable to function in our midst?

\* \* \* \* \*

Well...let's approach that question...let's approach that question by asking another question, namely this: "With whom do we identify...with which character in this parable...are we church-going types meant to identify when he listen to it closely?" While I don't presume to answer that question for anyone else, I will be so bold as to insist that my own answer...an answer unequivocally reached...involves a pretty clear identification with the second son: the one who says "yes", but who then fails to act on that "yes". Perhaps that seems obvious in my case, since I would have a hard time denying that I am part of whatever we might wish to describe as the religious establishment in this increasingly unestablished United Church of ours. But yes: I'm a clergy-person and it would be foolish indeed for me to pretend otherwise. If the shoe fits, wear it! And the shoe that belongs to the second son appears to fit my foot quite nicely, thank you very much. However! However!

Permit me to push that further, and make the point—a point that is especially apparent in a Province like British Columbia...in a city like Nanaimo...in which I suspect less than 10% of the population is in church this morning. We may like to see ourselves as laid-back, Progressive Christians who are not like those other Christians, the ones from which we seem obsessed to differentiate ourselves. Trust me! That's not how the world out there sees us. They see us as the establishment...and enjoy nothing more than being able to regard us as precisely the sort of hypocrites depicted by this parable: the sort who show up on Sunday to say "yes" to God, but who do their best the other 167 hours of the week to do as little of the Father's will as we can possibly get away with. That's how the world sees us; you can take that to the bank. But why...why...why-o-why does our Lord have to tell a parable like this one...a parable that gives the world such good ammunition? Nor should we overlook...

...nor should we overlook the fact that this parable fits quite nicely within an important strand of the larger Biblical world view. Side by side with the great Priestly traditions of the Old Testament which delight in the life of worship...and in many ways trumping those Priestly traditions...stands a prophetic tradition...

...a prophetic tradition that clearly shaped not only Jesus but also John the Baptist, forerunner, who so decisively shaped Jesus' ministry...

...both shaped by a prophetic tradition that is not afraid to critique ancient Israel's worship traditions with an almost ferocious intensity.

*"I hate, I despise your feasts,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,  
I will not look upon them.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.*

*But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

Let's not kid ourselves. There is a very clear line connecting this parable to those passionate words from the book of the prophet Amos: a line that makes it clear that God takes no delight in worship that fails to give birth to transformed lives, which is to say: That fails to give birth to lives that are willing to live out, in the midst of a broken world, the very Gospel we celebrate Sunday by Sunday when we come into this place. Whatever else...whatever else this parable places before us, it places before us the challenge of those who seek to follow a different path than the one chosen by the second son, whose lips are full of good words for his father, but whose life fails to manifest any of that goodness in a tangible way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Well: if you are anything like me, this will remain—for you—a parable that raises at least as many questions as it resolves. Yes: it resolves, quite definitively I think, that which is problematic about the action (more accurately the inaction) of that second son: the one whose words say “yes”, but whose life says “no”. Figuring that much out doesn't, I think, require a background in rocket science. And yet!

I remain troubled...troubled by that first son: the one who says no with his lips, but then says yes with his life. Does the parable suggest that he has no need for the things we try to offer in here? Does the parable hint at the possibility that a life lived rightly and well need not incorporate belief in God, need not embody conscious worship of God? Is what we do here on Sunday mornings a waste of time? Is our witness in this place a distraction from the important things we ought to be undertaking out there?

And it goes without saying that none of you will be surprised to learn that I want to answer those questions with a resounding no. I offer that no, in part, trusting that the Bible cannot be boiled down to any one text, even a really good text like this challenging parable. The same Bible that houses this parable also houses 150 magnificent psalms, each of them crafted for worship and/or personal prayer. Even more tellingly, the same New Testament that houses this parable, also houses many stories of Jesus knee deep in corporate worship as well as knee deep in personal prayer, personal prayer that means so much to him that when his disciples ask him to teach them how to pray, he offers them his own special prayer, without missing a beat. It need not be either-or; a life fully lived in and through God is a life that has room within it both for worship and for work; worship and work may not truly be one, but at their best they can embrace and mutually reinforce each other in a remarkably helpful way. And yes...much the same...

...much the same can be said of “faith” and “work”. Just as it is worth recalling that a life of worship and prayer can sustain us in our “work”...it should also be noted that it is almost impossible to sustain a life of faithful and patient public witness unless that witness is grounded in a clear belief that the universe itself has been shaped by a God whose love seeks to bring out the very best in us all. I find it ironic—and,

frankly, quite wonderful—that when Jesus expands on the parable in his confrontation with the religious leaders, that he critiques them not because they failed to live good lives but because they rejected John the Baptist...because they failed to “believe” in John the Baptist. In theory we may wish to say that our actions speak louder than our words...and yes, there is a great deal of truth to that. But unless our lives are grounded in a powerful word of truth...unless we have placed our trust, our faith, in something—better still Someone—who can help us to see through the thicket of this at times confusing world...

...in short, unless our beliefs align with the truth about our world, and about the God who in love fashioned this world...

...the odds are pretty strong (and those horrific images out of Charlottesville, Virginia over the past two days provide a stark reminder of how wrong belief and wrong worship can lead to horrific actions...)

...unless our beliefs...and our worship...align with the truth about our world, and about the God who in love fashioned this world for us all...then our actions are bound to fall dramatically short of the mark, dramatically short of what God yearns for in this glorious/broken world we call our home.

*O Christian love your sister and your brother!  
Where pity dwells the peace of God is there;  
to worship rightly is to love each other,  
each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.*

*Follow with reverent steps the great example,  
Jesus whose holy work was doing good;  
so shall the wide earth seem a hallowed temple,  
each loving life a psalm of gratitude.*

*Then shall all shackles fall, the stormy clangour  
of wild war music o'er the earth shall cease.;  
love shall tread out the baleful fire of anger,  
and in its ashes plant the tree of peace.*

May it be so...in Jesus' name! Amen!