

20th Sunday After Pentecost, 2008 (Proper 21A)

Gospel: Matthew 21:23-32

Old Testament: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Epistle: Philippians 2:1-18

Title: Jesus' Stories: The Two Sons

+INI+

Jesus likes to tell stories. We give them a fancy name and call them parables, but they're stories. At the ordination you heard the story of the weeds growing in the wheat, and learned that now is the time for planting, not pulling weeds. The following Sunday we heard three parables: the treasure, the pearl, and the net, learning that Jesus sought us and bought us to make us His own.

The stories Jesus tells are not ordinary, every day stories. They are extraordinary. There's always a twist. There's always something a little different, a little bit off: a farmer who won't pull weeds, a merchant who sells everything to buy a single pearl.

Today it is the story of the two sons. It's short and to the point. A father has two sons and a vineyard. He asks both sons to go to work. The first says no, but later changes his mind and goes to work. The second says yes, but never goes to work.

We all know the second son, the one who doesn't do the work. He might be one of your own children, maybe even your husband. He might be someone who works for you, a neighbor, a student or even a member of this congregation. He's the one who says "yes", he'll do the work, he'll cut the grass, he'll fix your car, he will take out the trash, he'll do whatever you need. But then he just doesn't follow through. You find him asleep on the couch, out with his friends, or working on some other project. There's always an excuse, and the job never gets done.

We all know the second son. If we look at ourselves hard enough, we realize that we are the second son. We've all made promises to our families, our friends, our teachers, our bosses. We may have every intention of following through, but we don't. We have our reasons and excuses, but at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter. The job doesn't get done.

What's worst of all is that it's not only our family we let down, and it's not just our coworkers and clients. We all let the Lord down. We make promises to Him to do the work He's given us to do. We promise to come to the Lord's House regularly, to pray and read the Scriptures, to give generously to the Lord. But we don't. And at the end of the day, the Lord finds us asleep on the couch, out with our friends, doing other things, doing our own thing. He doesn't find us working in the vineyard. He doesn't find us doing the work that we've said we would do.

In our parable this morning, this is the part that makes sense. We can identify with this part of the story. We've all had people let us down. We've all let other people down. We've all

let our heavenly Father down. But what about the first son? What do we do with him? Have you ever known anyone to act like this? The first son says, “No, I won’t work.” He doesn’t even pretend. He has no intention of working. He’s honest. He’s upfront. “No, I’m not going to work.”

We’ve experienced this also, when people flat out refuse to help, to get to work. You may have said things like this to the Lord as well. “You know what Lord, I’m not going to commit to coming to church. I’m not going to commit to praying and reading your word. I’m not going to commit to giving a tenth of my income, because I know I’m not going to.”

The unusual part of Jesus’ story, the extraordinary element, is that this first son, the one who says, “No, I won’t work,” somehow, by the end of the day, ends up out working in the vineyard. I don’t know about you, but I can’t remember having something like that happen to me. I can’t think of a time when someone told me that they wouldn’t do something, they flat out refused, and then they turned around and did it anyways.

So what was it? What caused the first son to turn off the TV, get off the couch and get to work? To answer this question, we need to look outside the story to the context, what else was happening and why Jesus tells this story.

The first son represents the tax collectors and prostitutes. These are the ones who originally said, “No,” to the Lord. Last week we heard about Matthew the tax man and what his life was like before the Lord called him to be His disciple. We know what these tax men are like. We know what it means to be a prostitute, too.

Both of these groups of people were living in rebellion against the Lord and His law. These are people who openly and publicly led a life of sin. They had said to the Lord, “No, I’m not going to work in your vineyard.” So what happened? What put an end to their rebellion?

Our gospel lesson points to the preaching of John. John had a simple message, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” The Lord is coming, and if He finds you slacking off, there will be hell to pay. This is the same message we heard in the Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel, “Repent and live.” The Lord cares for you and doesn’t want you to perish. This has always been God’s word to you. This was John’s message, and it was the law. It convicted people of their sin, helped them to realize the consequences of their actions and led them to repent.

But John didn’t just preach the law. He’s not John the preacher. He’s not John the prophet of doom. He’s John the Baptist. When people came to John and confessed their sins, he baptized them for the forgiveness of their sins. This is the difference maker. This is what gets the first son off the couch. It’s the preaching of the law and then Holy Baptism.

The Law sizes you up. The Law says, look, you’ve got a loving heavenly Father. You shouldn’t say, “No,” to Him. You shouldn’t be sitting around doing nothing. You should be out in the vineyard. Shame on you.

The Law shows us our sin. It convicts us. It makes us realize that we've done wrong. It drives you to despair. But it still doesn't get you off the couch. What gets you off the couch and into the vineyard is not the law, but the gospel.

The law prepares you, makes you ready to hear the gospel. But the reason you go out into the vineyard to work is not because you are afraid that your Father will punish you. Your Father will not force you to work. He'll let you be lazy. No, the reason why you go out and work in the vineyard is because you love your Father, and because you want to be a productive member of the family.

That love is not something that you create in yourself. You start out as a rebel, as an ungrateful child. But in Holy Baptism that rebel, that ungrateful child is drowned, and a new person is born. That new person, born from the waters of Holy Baptism, has both the will and the ability to do the Father's will. You are out in the vineyard. You are doing the Father's work in your home, in your community, in your congregation because you are baptized. You have been made new in your baptism, and this new person not only says "Yes," to the Lord, but the new person actually goes out and gets to work.

Jesus told the Pharisees that the tax collectors and the prostitutes were entering the kingdom ahead of them. The Pharisees were like the second son. They told the Lord that they would do His work, but they never followed through. They tried. They tried to live holy lives and obey all of the Lord's laws, but it was never enough.

We can never, on our own, completely do our Father's will. We will always fall short. As long as we rely on ourselves and our abilities, we will never do the job our heavenly Father wants us to do.

So where does that leave you? Are you the first son or the second son? Are you a tax collector or a Pharisee? Are you a rebel or hypocrite?

Well, it's not quite that simple. Our sinful flesh remains with us. At times we are like the first son and we don't want to be obedient. Other times we are like the second son and don't do what we've promised. Whether you are the first son or the second son, whether you are a rebel or a hypocrite, you still need to hear the preaching of God's Word. You still need to confess your sins, be renewed in your baptism and get to work.

Jesus tells a story about a Father who has two sons. What Jesus doesn't include in this story is that the Father has another Son. There's a third Son. There's the Son who says to His Father, "Yes, I'll work in your vineyard," and then He does. There is a Son who is neither a rebel nor a hypocrite. There is the Son who made Himself nothing, who finished His work by His death on the cross.

This is your brother. He's the one who comes to you when you're still on the couch, He tracks you down when you're out with your friends, He finds you and invites you to join with Him in working in your Father's vineyard. Thus is our Father's will done.

Week after week we pray “Thy will be done.” How is God’s will done? God’s will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God’s name or let His kingdom come; and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die.

God grant this to us all.