Matthew 21:23-32

23When he 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?” 24Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 26But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” 27So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

28“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32For 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 after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

What do you think? Whenever we hear a biblical story about siblings, we are conditioned to take sides, to make a judgment about which sibling is right and which is wrong, to pick a good guy and a bad guy or guys. Think of the parable of the prodigal son or Joseph and his brothers or the story of Jacob and Esau. Today's story is set up that way, at least at first glance. A man tells his two sons to go out and work in the vineyard. The first son refuses but later has a change of heart and goes out to work. The second son readily agrees to work, then changes his mind and doesn't go. Which of the two does the will of the father? Jesus is speaking here to the chief priests and the elders of the temple, who quickly pick the first son as the hero of the story. When we hear the parable, we react in different ways. If we are feeling confident about our faith and our willingness to obey our *heavenly* father, we see ourselves more like the first son than the second. If our faith is wobbly at the moment, we might identify more with the second son and feel guilty about it. Such is the state of faith that our confidence often wavers from day to day or even hour to hour. So we want to be the first son but sometimes we just can't make it happen.

Let's take another look at the parable. The first son initially refuses to go to the vineyard, then changes his mind. The second son says he'll get right out there, then doesn't follow through on his promise. The truth is that both sons disobey their father. Which of the two does the will of the father? Neither does, at least not at first. The first son refuses to do what his father tells him to and the second son goes back on his promise. When we acknowledge that, the meaning of the parable takes a major shift. If both sons initially disobey their father, then with which one do we identify? If there are only two choices, which son are we? Which one do we choose to be most like? If there is not a clear right or wrong here, what are we supposed to think, Jesus?

I think this parable is less a story about right and wrong siblings and more about their father. Let's put aside for a moment the weird condemnation that Jesus has for the church leaders about tax collectors and prostititutes getting into heaven before them (actually, let's put this part aside for another time, because I don't have a clue what it means), the parable ends with the priests and elders telling Jesus the first son does the will of the father. The big question here would be: What happens to change the first son's mind, to make him turn around and do what his father asks? Biblical scholars wouldt call that action of turning around “metanoia,” which is the Greek word for repentance in the Bible. So, when the first son repents, when he turns around and obeys his father, what causes him to do it? What about the next time he disobeys his father and the next? Where does he get the strength to come back to the father after he has taken off in the opposite direction? The strength comes from the father, from the relationship he has with his sons, from the desire of the father to always have his sons by his side and to work together with them for a common cause.

If a relationship with his father is able to make the first son repent, what about the second son? Is it possible for him to repent, to turn back to the one who loves him?

What about you and me? What if we are like both brothers, sometimes feeling a strong connection to God and sometimes not feeling it at all, sometimes willingly going where God leads us and sometimes turning our backs on God? What if God is continuously calling us to turn around and return to God, to the one who loves us, who gives us new life, even – and maybe especially when - we don't deserve it?

Maybe this is a story about hope, rather than judgment. That would be good news to you and me, for we often fear we are condemned forever by our actions. Many of us become stuck in our guilt and cannot move beyond our sense of shame for what we have done. We feel like hypocrites when we show up for work and church with our happy masks on, all the while knowing that if those around us knew who we really are, they would be horrified. We even try to hide from God, for we fear God's judgment most of all. And God's response? Each week we hear the truth. *“In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us and for his sake God forgives us all our sins.” “Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.”*  “*Take and eat, this is my body, given for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins. Do this for the remembrance of me.”*  Do you hear it? God has the power to move us beyond the mistakes of our pasts. They do not have to define us forever. God knows all we have done and still loves us. I remember a time when Billy and I were dating, when I confessed something from my past, something I wasn't particularly proud of and which I feared might make him think less of me. When I apologized for sharing it, Billy replied, “Don't be sorry. That just makes me feel even closer to you.” I think God's love for us is like that, only a million times more powerful.

God calls us continually to turn around, to return to God, to receive God's abundant grace and forgiveness and to be loved as a cherished child. That love enables us to love others, to forgive them and to work tirelessly so all may know God's love. There is no limit to God's forgiveness, which is great, because there is no limit to our sin. Each time God calls us back, we get another glimpse of God's desire for us to be by God's side as partners in God's activity in the world, in our communities and in our homes. We wish we could be more like the non-existent third son, the one who says “yes” to his father and follows through on his promise. The times we are able to do this are beautiful but they are fleeting. The times we are like those other sons are more frequent; we find then that God always follows through on God's promise to us.

This journey as a disciple takes a lifetime. There's not much we can do to move ourselves along; that is God's work. Maya Angelou once wrote: “When someone tells me they're a Christian, I always say, 'Already?'” Angelou knew that becoming a Christian, a faithful follower of Christ is a life-long endeavor, one that happens through the grace of a forgiving God. Martin Luther expressed that journey well in these words: “This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.”

Thank God for the grace of the Father!

Amen.

*Pentecost 17A*

*October 1, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 21: 23-32*