

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 28, 2008
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Psalm 25:1-14
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:28-32

Our Gospel lesson today drops us into the middle of a series of challenges and controversies posed to Jesus by the religious establishment, and so we need to fill in the gaps with some contextual matters.

Today's Gospel is the first of four episodes where the religious leadership comes to Jesus with a question which is designed to be a test or a trap. In this case, the "authorities" want to know who has given Jesus his authority to do what he has been doing, which has involved cleansing the temple of the moneychangers, cursing the fig tree, and healing of the blind and the lame.

Jesus answers their question with a question. He asks them where John the Baptist's authority resided. Of course, if they say from heaven, they are indicting themselves because they have flatly rejected John's ministry.

On the other hand, if they say John's authority was merely human, then they risk the "crowds" turning on them. So they are trapped.

Jesus then tells a parable or story about a father with two sons whom he instructs to go work in his vineyard. The first son initially says "no, I won't go," but then changes his mind and obeys his father's wishes.

The second son initially says, “yes, I’ll go,” but also changes his mind and does *not* obey his father’s wishes.

Jesus asks them, “which son did the will of his father?” And their reply is, “the first one.”

Jesus then interprets the parable by talking about John the Baptist’s ministry, and the two different responses by those who witnessed it. Those who are on the “fringes” of society (the tax collectors and prostitutes) are linked with the first son in the story, who actually does the will of his father. And he ties the religious leaders to the disobedient second son, because they have heard and witnessed John’s ministry and rejected it.

This Gospel text, coupled with our Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel and our Psalm and Epistle of the day, reinforce some important lessons which can do us all good this morning.

The first lesson is this: It is always tempting to substitute belief *about* God for obedience *to* God. It can become easy to be like the second son in the parable and say, “yes, father, I’ll go,” and then to pull back and sit still. We can be tempted to think that because we know a lot *about* God that we actually *know* God and are doing his will. What happens in this case is that we become *admirers* of Jesus, but not *followers* of Jesus.

But the message of our lessons this morning is that God is interested in *obedience*, whether that obedience is offered by Jew or Gentile. God is looking for people who will *do* his will, not merely talk about doing his will.

The language of the Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel is the language of repentance, of conversion, of turning from one way to embrace the way of God. The word “turn” appears no less than five times in this passage, and the message is clear: it doesn’t matter who you are, if you turn from sin and obey God you will live; if you insist on going your own way and continuing in your sin, you will be judged according to your actions and you will die.

That’s why the Psalmist can pray, “show me your ways, O LORD, and teach me your paths.” A way or a path is not something you just talk about, it is something on which you walk or travel. It is a way of living. Thus the Psalmist can also say, “the paths of the LORD are love and faithfulness to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.”

God is looking for obedience, regardless of your pedigree or social status. Jesus makes this point clearly in the Gospel. Because they believed the message of John the Baptist, Jesus says that the tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of Heaven before the religious elite will.

Now some have taken Jesus’ words here to mean that works and obedience are not relevant to getting into the Kingdom. It’s faith that matters.

This is not true. John the Baptist preached a message of repentance and bearing fruit in keeping with repentance (cf. Matthew 3). If the tax collectors and harlots believed John's message, then that means they repented and they bore fruit in keeping with repentance, which meant leaving behind sinful ways of life. Like the first son in the parable who initially said "no," these people changed their minds, they repented, they turned their lives to act in accordance with God's will. And in true biblical fashion, then, their living faith became manifested in their obedient works.

This leads to our second lesson for today: *The grace of God that saves you produces obedience in you, otherwise grace hasn't truly saved you.*

Now of course the ultimate example of obedience to the Father's will is not from the two sons in the Gospel lesson, but the Son whom Paul mentions in Philippians 2. He is the son who obeyed his father, even to the point of enduring a torturous death on a cross. The upshot of that for us, Paul says, is that we should be careful to put into action God's saving work in *our* lives, and to obey God with deep reverence and fear (Phil. 2:12).

In the book, *Out of Africa*, a young boy appears at the door of the author Isak Dinesen to ask for a job. She hires him but is surprised three months later when he comes to her asking her to recommend him to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim living in a nearby town.

Dinesen offers to raise the boy's salary, but he declines. He declines, saying money is not his interest. He has decided either to become a Christian or a Muslim, and his purpose in working for Dinesen has been to observe "close up" the ways of Christians. Now he is going to work for Sheik bin Salim, to see how Muslims live. The author ends the story by telling the boy, "I wish you would have told me this in the beginning."

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: "it's easy to tell if you are a follower of Jesus or just an admirer. Look in the mirror and see what's moving -- your mouth or your feet."

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, the grace that Jesus offers us is a grace that helps us to passionately wed doctrine and action, faith and works, belief and obedience. His is the grace that is living and active, that helps us to "rise and act our creed," as one of our Epworth hymns says.

So let us come to his Table today with faith, and with thanksgiving, knowing that grace is ours not merely to share our faith and talk about it -- but also to *live* it.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.