

Proper 21, Year A

September 28, 2014

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:28-32 When 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?" Jesus 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. Did 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?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So 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. "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?" 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. 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 after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

Presbyterian pastor Gary Charles describes two very different members of his former parish, a woman and a man. Of the woman, he says, "She knew all the right words. I was thrilled to have such an articulate person in the congregation. She was bright, well-read, and could out-debate the ablest opponent. And, fortunately, she was on the right side of nearly every political, social and church issue." Of the man, Charles says, "[He said] all the *wrong* words. When he talked, I cringed. I wondered to myself why someone with such prehistoric views would bother going to church. He was on the *wrong* side of nearly every issue, and he wasn't shy to share his ill-advised opinions..."

Pastor Charles continues: "I *respected* the woman with all the right words and barely tolerated the man with all the wrong words. Slowly, though, things changed. The woman was always in favor of our programs and our mission projects, but never could find the time to get involved. She spoke the right words. She believed the right things. She had the best intentions.

"To my surprise, the man always came through. Our church joined with another congregation to open a weekday soup kitchen. This man strongly opposed our church's participation in this project, casting the only negative vote at the [Church Board] meeting. Yet, when the doors to the kitchen opened, there he was dishing out soup and making sandwiches. He and I could not have thought more differently, but I could count on him. He was always there." (quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*, vol. 7, #10, p.40)

In our Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a man who asks his two sons to go work in the vineyard. The first responds with defiant words: "No, I **won't** go!", and yet later he changes his mind, and goes into the vineyard to work. The second son responds with respectful words, "I go, Lord." And yet he does **not** go. "Which," Jesus asks the chief priests and scribes, "**did** the will of the father?" The answer is so obvious, they cannot avoid responding, "the first." Then Jesus

hammers the nail home. He tells them, in effect: “You *know* God’s way. You know the right *words* about God. You *teach* the right words every day. But you are only paying *lip service* to God; you do not *serve* God. True faith is a **practical** thing, having ramifications for – and bearing impact upon – the way you live.”

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who *does* the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). What about you and me? We all *say*, “Lord, Lord.” We come to church each Sunday, know the words to the Lord’s Prayer and Nicene Creed, know when to sit, stand, or kneel. But how do we *treat* one another Monday through Saturday? How do we live each day in intimacy with God and in charity, forgiveness, and generosity with our neighbor? Some of you, I know, really do put your faith into practice, visiting shut-ins, giving people rides to church or a doctor’s appointment, volunteering for CASA, giving generously of your time, talent, and treasure, truly living out your life in Christ. But I know how easy it is to become complacent, to pay lip service to God, like the second son in our parable, but never “work out our own salvation,” as Paul says in our Epistle. So let’s examine our consciences for a minute: Do we gossip and degrade others behind their backs? Do we think only of ourselves and *our* problems, without a thought for our neighbor? Do we fail to even want to forgive those who hurt us? Do we sin by “What we have left *undone*”, *saying* all the right words, paying lip service to God, but not *doing* God’s will in our lives? The Book of James states, “Be *doers* of the word and not hearers only... What’s the use of *saying* you have faith if you don’t *prove* it by your actions?” (James 1:22; 2:14, NLT).

Seventeenth-Century author John Bunyan, in his classic book, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, describes the difficulty of linking *profession* of faith with *living* of faith. He writes: “Many who *cry out* against sin can live comfortably with it in their heart, home, and business. It is possible to learn all about the mysteries of the Bible and never be affected by it in one’s soul. Great knowledge is not enough.

“Christ told his disciples, ‘Now that you *know* these things, you will be blessed if you *do* them’ (John 13:17). He did not bless their *knowledge*. The blessing is in the **doing**. A person may *know* like an angel and still not be a Christian. Talkers and boasters enjoy *knowing* something. **God** is pleased when it is *done*.”

Scholar Douglas Hare describes the potential pitfall we faithful church-goers face of becoming like the second son in Jesus’ parable. He writes: “How easily ‘church work’ degenerates into little more than simply maintaining the institution, with no excitement concerning what God’s active grace is *doing* and consequently no enthusiasm for evangelism and renewal! We **say** that we are going to work in the vineyard, but instead of harvesting the grapes we spend our time re-arranging the stones along the path!” (Hare, *Matthew*, p.248) We can even practice “spiritual disciplines” – long hours of prayer, devotional reading, Scripture study – and yet not *bear fruit* from such disciplines. Monk and mystic Thomas Merton wrote: “As long as thought and prayer are not fully incarnated in an *activity* which supports and expresses them validly, the heart will be filled with a smoldering rage, frustration, and a sense of dishonesty.” (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*) We love to talk and sing about God’s love, hear about Christ’s forgiveness, pray devout prayers, receive the Body and Blood of our Lord in Eucharist—but does any of that truly

change us, empower us to *live* to the full the Life God has given us, to *give* to the full of the gifts God has given us?

“The Scriptures very clearly teach what we call today a ‘bias toward action,’” notes Richard Rohr. “It is not just belief systems or dogmas and doctrines, as we have often made it. The Word of God is telling us very clearly that if you do not **do** it, you, in fact, do not believe it and have not heard it.” If we do not **do** forgiveness, **practice** compassion and radical generosity in our lives, all our pious words are empty and useless – like the words of the second son in our Gospel.

Being a Christian is **more** than an intellectual or liturgical exercise. Jesus wants *followers*, not *admirers*. Not once did Jesus ever say, “Worship me”; yet over and over again he said “**Follow** me.” His question to us is not, “Do you agree with me?” but rather “Will you **join** me? Will you be a participating member of my team?”

Each week I offer to you the body and blood of Christ at communion, saying these ancient words of St. Augustine: “Behold who you are, become what you receive.” We do not receive communion to make us feel holy, but rather to **become** what we receive, to **become** the Body of Christ, the love and action of Christ in our world.

St. Theresa of Avila summed up the message of our Gospel with this poem, often quoted but, as today’s Gospel warns, *less* often put into practice:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Let us not allow Christ to be without hands, without feet, without eyes, without a Body in this hurting world that is so desperate for His Presence and His loving actions.

AMEN