

Proper 21A 2017 Sermon

October 1, 2017

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.”

Philippians 2:5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

Fr. John Shea tells this Sufi story:

There was a case against Mulla Nasruddin in the court, and the judge asked him, “How old are you, Nasruddin?”

And he said, “Of course, you know and everybody knows I am forty years old.”

The judge was surprised, [saying,] “But five years ago, you were also in this court. When I asked you then how old you were you said forty. How is this possible? After five years you are still forty.”

Nasruddin said, “I am a consistent man, sir. Once I say I am forty, I will remain forty... You can rely on me.”¹

The point of the story, I think, is that we can get stuck. Once we get an idea lodged in our heads, or take a stance on some issue, we humans can find it *very* hard to change, despite the fact that time and circumstances have changed and we have had new experiences and have been given new insights into – or revelations

of – divine Truth and God’s will. Albert Einstein once said, “Everything has changed but our thinking.”²

To even entertain the idea of his theories of relativity, Einstein had to open **his** mind to the possibility that time and space are not absolutes, as had always been thought, but rather are relative. Scientists have *proven* that you can have two identical atomic clocks synchronized perfectly, and if you keep one clock stationary on the earth, and send the other clock in a space ship to orbit the earth at great speed, the orbiting clock will, when brought back to earth, show that less time had passed for that clock than for the clock that had remained stationary on the earth. Einstein’s theory also means that a yardstick traveling near the speed of light will become actually, objectively less than a yard long. To accept Einstein’s relativity theory, scientists had to change their minds away from their long-held viewpoint that time and physical properties are absolute and Newtonian physics always hold true. Today, we drive around in cars guided by GPS systems which, without the corrections supplied by the mathematics of Einstein’s Relativity theory, would never be accurate. And GPS is but one of the things we would not have today if Einstein had not fundamentally changed the minds of the world.

We humans have now had 100 years to come to believe Einstein’s theories, and I think that most of us do, even if we don’t understand them. We are willing to accept that we may not be seeing the total picture of reality; willing to accept that others may know better than we. We are willing to have our minds changed in this area of science.

But changes in our thinking about social or religious or political issues are another story. As difficult as it is to change our thinking about the relative nature of time and space, it is much harder to change our thinking about some religious or social or political point of view that we have held tightly in our minds and have come to identify with.

Which brings us to today’s Gospel story.

It is the day after Jesus had performed the most socially and religiously *scandalous* act of his life: he had come into the Temple and overturned the tables of the money-changers and had driven out all those who were buying or selling sacrificial animals in the Temple. Now, we must understand that animal sacrifices were not only *central* to the whole Jewish faith of Jesus’ day, they also brought huge amounts of money into the Temple coffers and into the pockets of middle- and upper-class folk in Jerusalem. In the process of overturning the money-changers’ tables, Jesus is also overturning the chief priests’ and elders’ interpretations of religious law and tradition and the very financial basis of the Jerusalem economy.

As today’s Gospel story opens, the chief priests and elders have had all night long to think of how to respond to Jesus’ outrageous overturning of the money-

changers' tables, and they have come up with an approach to trap him. The chief priests and elders hold recognized, legitimate and authoritative religious positions, whereas Jesus holds **no** such position. They take advantage of this fact and ask Jesus, "By what authority do you do such things?" John Shea explains the trap: "If Jesus says he does these things on his own authority, he appears to be a maverick, without any legitimation from his faith tradition. If he says he does them on **God's** authority, he has infringed on [the priests' and elders'] turf, for **they** are the [recognized] guardians of the law and the *official* interpreters of what comes authentically from God." ³

But Jesus does not let the chief priests and elders set the conditions for the argument. As he so often does, Jesus alters the game – this time by introducing a new player, John the Baptist, who had been quite charismatic and popular with the people, but who had criticized the religious officials, offended a member of the royal family, and had been beheaded.

Jesus asks the chief priests and elders, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And suddenly, those who had set out to trap Jesus find themselves in a trap. If they say that John's baptism was from heaven, Jesus will respond, "Then why did you not believe him?" But if they say that John's baptism was of human origin, the **crowd** will turn against them, since the *people* regarded John as a prophet. So they punt, and answer Jesus, "We do not know."

Then Jesus tells them a parable: "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?" The chief priests and elders respond, "The first." And Jesus says 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."

Presented with the inspired righteousness of John the Baptist, the disreputable tax collectors and prostitutes changed their minds and believed, while the reputable chief priests and elders did not change their minds.

I had a priest friend in Lubbock, Texas who had posted a written prayer on her office door that read: "Lord, help me always to be right, for you know I will never change my mind." We laugh because we know it's true of us: we hold tightly to our way of thinking, even in the face of changing circumstances and evidence and experience and divine insight and revelation. Like Nasrudden, we remain unwaveringly 40 years old. And in our political election campaigns, a candidate holding a position *today* which is **contrary** to the position the candidate

held 10 years ago is considered being “wishy-washy” or “not holding to one’s convictions.” But what if the change of mind is a step in the right direction, an actual growth in wisdom and character, becoming 41 rather than remaining 40? Clearly, in today’s Gospel, Jesus is saying that changing one’s mind in the face of new circumstances and evidence and experience and divine insight and revelation is to be encouraged and applauded, while **not** changing one’s mind in the face of new circumstances and evidence and experience and divine insight and revelation is to be stubborn and closed off from the movement of God’s Spirit. “Even after you saw John’s way of righteousness, you did not change your minds and believe him,” Jesus scolds the chief priests and elders.

Where did we get this idea that to change our minds is to be weak? Repentance, changing one’s mind in response to new circumstances and evidence and experience and divine insight and revelation, takes tremendous courage and deep humility! John Shea writes, “Loyalty to the mind is foolish. Consistent thinking, holding the same position now as we did earlier, has a high price tag. It often entails denying our participation in the river of life. The spiritual adage is: the mind makes a good servant but a poor master. Too often we cling to what we think. When we do this and it keeps us from attuning ourselves to the deep rhythms of life that are bringing us to redemption, the mind is the master.”⁴ And we are its slaves, forever stuck at age 40.

“Even after you saw John’s way of righteousness, you did not change your minds...”

In our Epistle reading today, St. Paul exhorts us, “Have **this** mind in you that was in Christ Jesus...” Paul is calling us to continue to grow and change our mind until it becomes the mind of Christ.

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 289

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*, p. 286

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 289