

Pentecost 20  
September 28, 2008  
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The Gospel this morning is a parable about judgment and repentance. Many of Jesus' parables are familiar to us but this is not one you most likely recall. In fact, Matthew is the only Gospel writer to include this parable. It is the first of a trilogy of parables that deal with the rejection of Jesus by the very people who it would seem should be the ones to accept him.

Matthew begins by telling us the chief priests and leaders of the people came to Jesus to demand that he explain by what authority he spoke. Jesus had attacked the temple leadership and overturned the tables of those who were selling animals for sacrifice. Jesus knew that if he claimed divine authority the religious leaders would accuse him of blasphemy. On the other hand, if Jesus was acting on his own, they would condemn him of disrespect and stone him to death.

Jesus agrees to answer the leader's question if they will answer a question for him. He asked if they believed the ministry of John the Baptist was authorized by God or not. The religious authorities realize Jesus has led them into a trap. If they agree that John was sent by God, then Jesus is going to question why they did not believe and act on John's message of repentance. If they say John was acting on his own authority then the crowds were going to be unhappy because people believed John was a prophet sent by God. So, they decline to answer. In turn, Jesus does not answer their question.

As often happens, Jesus turns the tables on those who questioned him. Jesus engages his hearers by asking a question, "Tell me what do you think?" A man had two sons. He went to the first son and asked him to go work in the vineyard. The son refused to go. So, the man went to his second son and asked him to go work in the vineyard. He gave the answer his father wanted to hear, "I go, sir." But he did not do what he told his father he would do.

In the meantime, the first son changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard. "Which of the two did the will of the Father?" Jesus asked. The answer is obvious. The first son did the will of his father even though he said he was not going to. He changed his mind and went into the vineyard.

Neither of these sons is a role model; both of them say one thing and then do something different. Both of them cause pain for their father, one by disobeying his father outright and the other by disobeying behind his back.

This parable is about obedience. When words and actions do not coincide there is disobedience. It might be that the words are misleading as in the cases of these two sons. The brothers in the Gospel story had the opportunity to carry out their father's will by going into the vineyard. One refused outright and the other refused but thinking better of his refusal, changed his mind.

Jesus holds this parable up to the religious authorities inviting them to take a look in the mirror. His intent is to provide a picture of reality. The story is designed to show the religious authorities and anyone else feeling self righteous, how things really are. Jesus warns that words and deeds must match.

It would seem that this is just another story in the Bible about the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. Hypocrisy is a charge that has been leveled against religious people in most every age - we say one thing but we do something else. We promise that we will love one another on Sunday but on Monday we cheat, steal and just plain ignore each other. It is a serious charge brought against those who pretend goodness in order to gain an advantage over other people. I do not think we set out to act in that way. I think the majority of us have what my mother would call, "good intentions." Maybe we are more like the second son that we want to admit. I have to admit that concerns me. We are more concerned about our own beliefs and desires than our understanding of God and obedience to God. It is as if it is enough to say, "I go," without ever intending to get up out of our pews.

I am not sure how it all starts. Maybe it starts with our understanding of ourselves and our understanding of what it means to be in relationship with God. Maybe it is that we think faith and participation in organized religion is just one more thing to choose in the great smorgasbord of life. I think it is very easy to confuse beliefs and actions.

Maybe it is that we have such good imaginations. We believe we have done things that we have only thought about doing. Let's forget God for a minute. Have you ever thought about visiting a sick parishioner or even someone in a nursing home who cannot get out much? You look at your calendar and all you have to do, deciding to send a card instead. You think what a nice gesture it is to remember a friend and congratulate yourself on your thoughtfulness. You let things go at that.

I hope I am not the only person here today who has ever done that. I have thought about someone, decided sending a card was better than a delayed visit due to an over busy schedule. That way the person at least knows I thought about them. Then I cannot remember if I ever sent the card or not. I roll an idea around in my head until I think I have done it.

It is easy to get beliefs and actions mixed up. Right now I know a dozen people who believe they love their families but they spend so little time with their families that family members hardly know who they are. I know another twenty people who believe in protecting the environment yet they drive a car that gets less than ten miles a gallon. I know a hundred people who say they are against violence and yet stand in line for the latest violent movie.

It is a strange thing this gap between what we believe and what we do. The theological word for it is sin. Sin is inevitable and forgivable but never tolerable if we love God. Sin tears up our families, our communities, our nation when we say one thing and do something else, when we say "I go" and never get off our chair. Bottom line is what we believe has no meaning apart from what we do.

I believe there is no shortage of faithful people who believe and stand for what is right. To quote Kierkegaard, "Jesus wants followers, not admirers." Whether we say yes or no to him is less important than what we actually do about our belief. The important thing is what our lives are saying to others about who we really are and what we really believe.

Jesus holds up a mirror to the religious leaders of his day and in doing so to us in our day. As you look in the mirror, what do you see? Are your feet moving or just your mouth?