

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, June 26, 2024
Matthew 21:28-32
Friends with Jesus

HOLY GOSPELMatthew 21:28-32, RSV
Last week we read of Jesus cursing the fig tree and answering those who questioned his authority. Now we read the Parable of the Two Sons.

Before the Gospel:

☞ The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the Twenty-first Chapter:

☛ **Glory to you, O Lord.**

[Jesus said] ²⁸“What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he repented and went. ³⁰And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him.”

After the Gospel:

☞ The Gospel of the Lord.

☛ **Praise to you, O Christ.**

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this parable, it seems to me that it was a pretty bad day for the father when it comes to either son. Jesus asks folks which of the two sons did the will of the father, and they answer, “The first.” They mean the obstinate son who answered “I will not” — I will not go into the vineyard and work — but then did go. They prefer that son to the second son — the son who also spoke falsely — the son who said he would go, but did not go. Well, yes, I understand that. But I think that many a father and many a mother would have been hurt by the first son too. It is not fun to ask your son to do something, but he point blank refuses. It is good if later, he changes his mind and does what you ask, but still, there is that initial injury. They say that “Sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but words shall never hurt me.” But that is not true, is it? Words can indeed hurt us. Both of these sons are disappointing — the second son more than the first, but still, both have failed to honor their father.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of “going astray.” He spoke of this in his beautiful words about the Suffering Servant:

⁶All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6, RSV)

That’s what I think of these two sons in our Lord’s parable: They *both* have gone astray — one worse than the other, but still, both astray.

The apostle Paul makes the same point as the prophet Isaiah:

For there is no distinction; ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... (Romans 3:22-23, RSV)

Again, both of the sons in our Lord’s parables have fallen short. The commandment says “Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother.” But both of these sons have failed at that.

The force of the parable is to prefer the first son to the second — to prefer the son who eventually obeyed his father to the second who said he would, but did not. I do not want us to miss that. As St. Paul says:

¹³For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. (Romans 2:13, RSV)

The first son does better along these lines than the second one. For all his stubbornness, the first son does end up being a “doer of the law.” He says “I will not” and yet, in the end, he does what his father asks of him.

So, I do not want us to miss this point. Good for the first son for eventually doing the law.

But it seems to me that in his *application* of the parable, Jesus does not talk so much about obedience. One son ended up obeying his father and the other son did not. But when Jesus turns from the parable to address the folks around him, his emphasis is not so much on obedience, but on personal relationships. The parable, first of all, is about our personal relationship to Jesus.

In his application of the parable, Jesus speaks of scandalous folks getting into the kingdom ahead of righteous folks:

Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.” (Matthew 21:31, RSV)

Why? Why do the disreputable ones get in the kingdom first? Answer: because the poor and lowly loved Jesus better than many of the fancy folk of the city. The despised tax collectors and the harlots were glad of their friendship with Jesus, while the righteous folks often rejected Jesus and indeed, plotted to kill him. The despised tax collectors and harlots entered the kingdom first in that they were among the first who loved Jesus. They were first, not because of their obedience, for their track record was not so good along those lines, but because of their personal relationships to Jesus.

It is nothing to brag about to be a traitor to your own people, like the tax collectors, or to be a harlot. None is innocent. As Psalm 14 puts it:

They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one. (Psalm 14:3, RSV)

But at least the tax collectors and harlots have taken a big step in the right direction: they have developed a personal relationship with Jesus. Indeed, that was one of the complaints about Jesus in the eyes of righteous folks. Jesus speaks of it:

¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; ¹⁹the Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' (Matthew 11:18-19, RSV)

When the tax collectors and sinners come to Jesus, what does he say to them? Well, he says to them and he says to us what he said to the adulterous woman long ago:

...go, and sin no more. (John 8:11, KJV)

Obedience is indeed part of this story. Indeed, it is hard to say we have a personal relationship to Jesus if we go around disobeying him. That seems more like pretending. So, obedience is important. But the story begins with people coming to Jesus, seeking his friendship.

Stepping back and looking at this evening's short Bible reading, I would say that it speaks of a wonderful possibility. The tax collectors and the harlots were despised, yet look at them now: they are the friends of Jesus. They are his friends, and he will lead them into better paths if they really draw near to him. Whatever life brings us, and whatever mistakes we have made, it is good to know that this possibility is always open to us: that we might become the

friends of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.