

Opening Our Eyes and Hearts

Today's Gospel passage brings the conflict between Jesus and the Temple authorities into the open. Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem just two days earlier. He came back to disrupt the Temple's trade in sacrificial animals the following day, overturning tables and making an ungodly mess. Now he's back, strolling around and teaching the crowd, which the Temple authorities haven't given him permission to do. The chief priests and elders are undoubtedly miffed when they ask Jesus by what authority he's "doing these things." They may mean the events of the past few days, or they may mean his entire ministry, including the miraculous healings and multiplying of food. The Greek word they use for "authority," *exousia* (ἐξουσία), refers not only to temporal and religious authority, but also to spiritual power. The chief priests and elders knew of only two sources of such power: Adonai and the Adversary. By asking Jesus to name the source of his powers, the chief priests and elders are really asking whose team he's on, and they're probably not happy with his reply.

Jesus could simply reassure the chief priests and elders that his *exousia* comes from Adonai. Instead, he asks them about John the Baptist, putting them in a very awkward position. If they concede the spiritual legitimacy of John's baptism, a new ritual that was never authorized by the Temple, they admit that they failed to recognize and support a prophet of God. They seemingly want to deny John's legitimacy but are afraid of being attacked by Jesus's mob of supporters if they do. So, they duck the question, Jesus refuses to answer them, and they're left to simmer in their own bruised dignity.

Mark and Luke leave it there, moving straight into the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. But Matthew first gives us the little parable of a father who asks his two sons to go work in the family vineyard. Neither boy covers himself in glory. The first refuses, but then changes his mind

and goes to the vineyard as his father asked. The second agrees to go but doesn't. When Jesus asks which son did his father's will, the chief priests and elders correctly choose the first son, but their choice doesn't win them any points. Jesus still tells them that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of Heaven before they do, which must have delighted the listening crowd and infuriated the Temple leaders.

In all candor, I didn't understand this parable right away because neither son got it entirely right. They both should have agreed right away to work in the vineyard and then made good on their promises. That's what Jesus did when he embraced his Father's will and allowed himself to be crucified. But Jesus doesn't tell this parable to illustrate perfect obedience to the Father. He tells it to make two other points. First, the things people say matter less than what they do. Second, God expects us to pay attention to what's actually going on around us, and to adjust our beliefs and behavior when it becomes clear that we've got it wrong.

To the first point, the father in the parable would have been happiest if the first son had immediately agreed to go to the vineyard. Faced with a choice between the second son's false obedience and the first son actually doing the work, however, the father prefers the latter. Both sons' actions mean more than their words.

To the second point, true obedience requires believers to look for what God is doing in the world, repent, and change course when God does new things. At first, the Temple authorities had reason to be leery of John the Baptist. John was a pretty colorful character who could just as easily have been a madman as a divinely ordained prophet. However, once it became clear that God was doing a new thing with John, inspiring his baptism, and using him to announce the impending arrival of the Messiah, the Temple authorities should have put aside their reservations and embraced John as wholeheartedly as the tax collectors and prostitutes did. They should have

protected John from Herod. And if they should have figured out what God was doing with John, they certainly should recognize Jesus as God's handpicked Messiah once they see who he is and what he can do. Jesus tells the chief priests and elders that their stubborn refusal to do God's will by accepting John makes them less holy than the tax collectors and prostitutes whom they consider to be the dregs of the earth. It's a harsh criticism of some very proud and powerful men.

History gives us certain advantages over the chief priests and elders. We don't have to figure out that Jesus is the Messiah, because the church worked that out for us centuries ago. But that doesn't mean we always know what to do about it. We live in a diverse, secular society under a government that rightly refuses to force religion on its citizens. We have tremendous freedom to think for ourselves and allow our hearts to guide our faith. I believe that's the way God would have it. He gave us free will because he wants loving children who seek to do his wishes not because we're afraid of being punished, but because we genuinely want to please him. But life can be complicated, and it's not always immediately obvious what God wants us to do. We have to pay attention, actively looking to see what God seems to be doing. We have to be willing to serve God as we're able, even if that means taking a chance or trying something uncomfortable or new. And we have to be willing to let God shape us, which sometimes requires us to give up outdated beliefs or rethink our cherished plans. It's been said that when people plan, God laughs. If that's true, I don't think God is laughing *at* us. He's laughing in delight, because the plans he has for us are always so much better than anything we could have come up with ourselves and he can't wait to help us find our way into the future he has in store for us.

If all of this sounds like a lot of work, it is. It can seem easier to stick with what we think we know and keep doing what we've always done. But that deprives us of the opportunity to grow in love. It robs us of the joys that accompany faithful service to our God. And it blinds us to

the miracles that God scatters across Creation every day. Simply put, you can't see a rainbow if you're too stiff-necked and stubborn to turn your head and open your eyes.

Fortunately, this parable tells us that we don't always have to get it right the first time. Even if we fail to do God's will at first, we can still change our minds and try again. And we can encourage each other. Perhaps the second son would have gone to the vineyard if he had known his brother would be there. They might have had a lot of fun that day, hanging out together while doing their father's work in their little corner of the world.

That's where the church comes in. It's hard to be Christian alone. It's much easier when we're in the company of fellow believers in a congregation like St. Luke's. We can grow in understanding by studying Scripture together and sharing our insights. We can rejoice together in our blessings and comfort one another in our sorrows. We can join in the sacred meal of the Eucharist and bond over coffee after services. And we can contribute to God's holy work in the world, keeping an eye out for the Holy Spirit and offering loving correction if anybody seems to be veering a little off course.

Every one of us has a path to walk. We can go it alone but, if we do, we're much more likely to get lost, and we won't have anywhere near as much fun. As stewardship season begins, we'll consider some of the paths that brought us to St. Luke's and dream about the path we'll walk together into the year ahead. We'll encourage each other to open our eyes and hearts to God's presence around us. If we catch a glimpse of the Holy Spirit along the way, we'll take it as an invitation to pitch in, help out, and try new things. It will be exciting, it might be a little scary, and it will certainly be a whole lot of fun. *Amen.*