

Sermon for Proper 21A  
Sunday, October 1, 2017  
“Flipping over”

Text: Matthew 21:32-32

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I imagine most of us have been in a situation where we were asked to do something that we didn't want to do, but in the end, we did it anyway. When I was growing up, we had chickens in our back yard, even though we lived in the city. It was my job to collect the eggs every day after I came home from school. I hated getting the eggs, because the chickens were nasty and dirty and the hens pecked at me if I tried to get the eggs they were sitting on. When my grandfather asked me if I had collected the eggs yet, I often told him, “No,” with some degree of rebellious indignation, but when I didn't think anyone was looking, I would go into that nasty smelly chicken coop and get the eggs anyhow. More often than not, one of those eggs would be breakfast the next morning.

In today's Gospel lesson, we find Jesus in a confrontation with the religious leaders about power and authority. This scene comes right after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. Both actions disturbed the religious leaders greatly, because they felt their power and authority were threatened. Not only that, but when Jesus turned over the tables of the moneychangers, he disrupted a major component of the temple's economy. The scripture tells us that the chief priests and the elders—that would be the Pharisees mainly—questioned Jesus as to who gave him the authority by which he was doing all the things he had done. The chief priests and scribes certainly had good reason to ask Jesus about the source of his authority; they understood their authority as leaders in the Temple to have come from God. Jesus knew they were trying to trap him, so he responded to their questions with a question, which he knew they could not answer. That undoubtedly made them even angrier, so Jesus told them a parable.

A man had two sons whom he asked to go work in his vineyard. The first refused to go, but changed his mind and went; the second said he would go, but did not. “Which of the two did the will of his father?” Jesus asked. The Pharisees answered, “The first.” Then Jesus jabbed them with his theological dagger: “The tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

The thing about the parable of the two sons is not so much that it is a lesson in obedience, but rather, that it is a teaching point about repentance and discipleship. The chief priests and the elders were trying to trap Jesus into claiming that his actions were done under false authority, but Jesus knew that his authority was the authority of God himself. The Pharisees believed that they were the ones given authority from God and that they were the guardians of the Temple and the Law; they knew the Scriptures inside and out, but they were allowing their authority to turn the Temple into a business, and they were letting the words of the Torah serve as a barrier to maintaining relationships with others. For Jesus, they were like the son who said, “Yes,” to his father, but did not go into the vineyard to work. Other folks were taking the message to heart; first it was the message of repentance that John the Baptist preached, then it was the message of new life that Jesus continued preaching. Those folks who were considered sinners of society heard that message, repented, and began to lead a new life that included having a renewed relationship with God. The message of the parable was that no matter what we have done in our past, there is always room in God’s arms of grace and mercy for us to repent and return to him.

The lectionary readings last week focused on God’s unlimited grace and mercy, and today’s reading from the gospel goes further into that message. The point of this story isn’t the story itself, but the message that despite our past with all of our shortcomings and brokenness, God calls us into something new through repentance and the changing of our ways. God calls us into new life in him through Jesus Christ. This is a lesson in discipleship and obedience to God, but we are not called into blind faith and thoughtless obedience; rather, we are invited to be fruitful and productive believers. We can come to church every Sunday, we can read the Bible every day, we can light candles, we can even quote Bible verses in the streets, but none of that will get us into the kingdom of God if we aren’t doing those things that will bring us into closer relationship with God. If we’re just going through the motions so we can show how pious we are, that doesn’t mean anything; we are being like the chief priests and the scribes. But if we are praying, singing, worshipping, and serving out of a genuine love for God and our neighbor and out of a genuine desire to be drawn closer to God, then we are doing something. And our lives on Monday through Saturday should be just as focused on those relationships as they are in the hour or two here at church on Sunday.

Of course, life sometimes throws us curve balls that cause us to mess up. Sometimes we fall short. Sometimes we do those things we ought not to have done and we don't do those things we ought to have done. Sometimes we sin. The good news in all of this is that when we act like the first son and say "No" to God, he is always ready to receive us back when we go ahead and do his work in the vineyard. When we are the cause of tension in our relationships, we can always forgive. When we are bad stewards of our bodies, we can always change our ways and take care of ourselves. When we let the anxieties and worries in our lives draw us away from depending on God to provide for us and see us through the low points in our lives, God is already beside us waiting for us to call on him.

When I think about this gospel lesson, I think of the phrase "topsy-turvy." That is an appropriate description of what Jesus often did in confronting the status quo of his day, and he did it again in the scene from today's gospel lesson. Just as Jesus had flipped over the tables in the temple, turning the economy of the temple and the religious leaders upside-down, he flipped over the status quo with his radical message that no matter who we are, no matter what we have done in our lives, even when we seem to go against doing the will of God, God still loves us—God continues to love us. In fact, he loved us so much that he became one of his own creation, and his incarnate-self faced death to secure our eternal salvation. He faced death and rose again to remind us that whatever course our life has taken, there is always hope. No matter what our past is, repentance, restoration, renewal, and new life in Christ is always an attainable future. But this gospel lesson also reminds us that going through the motions of a faithful life are not enough; simply saying we're Christians or showing up for mass every Sunday is not enough. We have to put our money where our mouth is, as it were; we must show off our faith in the lives that we lead and in the ways that we try to transform the world around us and bring about the kingdom of God. We don't have to let the status quo of our society and world disable us; we, too, can turn the world on its head by being loving, inclusive, welcoming, and by showing that our faith in God through Christ Jesus can enable us to take on whatever curve balls life throws at us. Amen.

## Resources

*Dear Partner in Preaching*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/09/pentecost-16a-open-future/>

*SermonWriter*, <http://www.lectionary.org/SW/09-28rn/Matt.21.23-32.htm>

*Feasting on the Word* for Proper 21 (Year A, Volume 4)