

## **September 27, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)**

### **Matthew 21:28-32**

“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.”

### **This is the Word of the Lord | Thanks be to God**

#### **Message: Faith in Action**

You know the old light bulb joke, right?  
There's got to be a hundred variations of it,  
for every organization imaginable;  
sometimes funny, always a little pointed,  
a little bit too on-target to be comfortable.

I've been told a few Presbyterian versions over the years.  
How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?  
At least 15 - One to change the light bulb,  
and three committees to approve the change.  
Or how many Presbyterians does it take  
to change a light bulb? None at all.  
If God wants the lightbulb changed  
He will do it Himself!

Or maybe it takes four Presbyterians to change that light bulb:  
one to put in the new bulb,  
and three to stand around and talk  
about how great the old bulb was.

That last variation of the joke may hit a little closer to home,  
in these days of change and uncertainty.  
The joke reminds us how we remember the old  
as such a golden place of comfort and security,  
that we fear the new as a wild frontier,  
uncharted, uncertain.  
Or maybe that joke reminds us  
how we become so familiar with the old,

even when the old wasn't working,  
that we don't want anything different.  
Easier to hang onto the old way of doing things,  
than risk getting shaken up by something new.

That is precisely what is happening in the Scripture text  
we read from the Gospel of Matthew just now.  
Jesus had been shaking things up,  
for nearly three years by that point.

He started in the north, in Galilee.  
Now, he's worked his way to Jerusalem,  
the very capital of the people's religion and politics,  
and here we are, only days after his triumphal entry.  
Jesus is changing the light bulb.  
And he's making people mad.

In this parable, Jesus' teaching story, that we read today,  
we have one father and two sons.  
If you had a vineyard to cultivate or work to be done,  
which son would you rather have?  
When the father orders the one son to go to work, he replies,  
"I will not! I've got places to go, things to do, people to see.  
Pick your own grapes!"  
But then, we can imagine,  
that sometime after his father walks away  
looking rather wounded,  
the young man's conscience  
gets the better of him.  
So he changes out of his fancy going-to-town clothes,  
throws on his overalls, and heads out to the vineyard.

Meanwhile the father has approached his other son and made the same request.  
"I go, sir! I'm on my way!"  
The father walks away from this exchange,  
we assume, feeling good that at least one of his sons  
knows how to treat his old man with respect.

But then, with no word to the father,  
this boy sneaks over to the marketplace  
to spend some time with his friends  
and so never does go into the vineyard.

"Which son would you rather have?" Jesus asks.

“Who really did what his father wanted?”

Jesus was telling this parable to the religious leaders,  
the most powerful men of Jerusalem,  
and they felt sure that the son who ultimately  
went to help in the vineyard did what his father wanted.

And then Jesus makes it blazingly clear just who these two sons represent.  
The first son in the parable was like the tax collectors and prostitutes.  
They had lived all their lives in direct contradiction of God’s expectations  
as written down in the commandments and codes of God’s people.  
The way they lived their lives was a rejection  
of God’s claim upon their lives.  
And yet, even though they rejected the ways of God  
publicly and demonstrably,  
when they heard John the Baptist,  
and when they saw and heard Jesus,  
they believed and they followed.

The second son in the parable certainly represents the religious leaders.  
The second son promises to do what God asks him to do,  
but then doesn’t do it.  
Like the second son,  
the religious elite care more about themselves  
than they do their Father’s wishes.

They promised to follow God’s commands,  
live up to God’s expectations,  
but when God revealed His command for their lives  
and God’s expectation for how they were to shape and care  
for the lives of God’s people,  
they went their own way,  
did what they wanted to do.  
They refused to hear what God was saying  
through the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

It might seem at this point that those two groups of people,  
represented by these two sons, are on very different paths;  
that the tax collectors and prostitutes  
and least powerful people in society,  
because they got the message  
and are listening and following Jesus now,  
that they’re “good,”  
And that the chief priests and elders of the Jewish religion

– those religious leaders, the bad son –  
are just bad.

These two very different groups of people  
each encountered Jesus and responded,  
and so we have the son who turned up to work in the vineyard  
and the son who didn't.

Something that's always troubled me  
about such an easy reading of this parable, though,  
is that neither son is really exactly what you'd want  
as parent or as a disciple;  
neither of them are really shining examples  
of sonship or discipleship,  
with both trying to evade the vineyard,  
in their own way.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes and the social and economic outcasts  
were not good as they were;  
the religious leaders were worse.  
And setting them up in opposition against each other,  
well, I wonder if that's not missing part of the point  
that Jesus was trying to make.

There's a key phrase in this parable,  
a difference between son #1 and son #2,  
between the outcasts and the powerful,  
that might give us a clue:  
the first son "changed his mind"  
and Jesus says to the religious leaders:  
"you did not change your minds."  
And so we come to it:  
Jesus came to inspire change.  
Not in the laws that the religious leaders had been following;  
not of the word of God, written down and read  
and curated for centuries;  
not even to change lightbulbs.  
Jesus came to change creation,  
and that needed to start  
with people  
changing their minds.

There is a particular word that's used in Scripture and here at church  
to talk about that kind of change;  
and that word is repentance.

It's a word rich with meaning,  
 encompassing sorrow and regret,  
 hope and anticipation;  
 But at heart, it means to turn away from an old way of thinking and living;  
 to change your mind,  
 and live differently as a result.  
 That's the decision that Jesus  
 – his person and his ministry –  
 demanded, and that's why setting  
 the tax collectors and the prostitutes  
 in total opposition  
 to the religious leaders  
 is not quite right;  
 because they all had the same need:  
 to change their minds.

Whoever we are, whoever we have been,  
 we all start in the same place:  
 needing to have our minds, our whole lives,  
 changed by Jesus.

As long as we live, we never get over that need.  
 And God's hope is that we'll all end in the same place, too:  
 in the vineyard, in the world;  
 putting our faith into action.

Like those religious leaders,  
 so comfortable and unwilling to hear Jesus,  
 unwilling to let God's living Word change their minds,  
 we can be unwilling to let Jesus totally lose in our lives,  
 renewing our minds, restoring our hearts,  
 rebuilding our relationships with one another  
 and with God.

Even when we recognise that who we are is a bit broken and bruised,  
 we may try to evade Jesus,  
 like the son who said no...but went into the vineyard eventually.  
 Or even when we're more like the second son,  
 thinking we're just fine and doing this Christianity thing  
 pretty well already,  
 the uncharted territory  
 of where Christ wants to take us  
 may make us cling  
 to the old lightbulb,  
 rather than risk  
 flipping the switch

on a new and brighter one.

Repentance is not something we can do once and be done with.  
Like so many parts of our spiritual journey,  
it's a process, part of what propels us onward in our Christian walk.

When we follow Jesus,  
our minds and hearts and lives are constantly  
growing and changing.  
A famous theologian wrote that  
repentance grows as faith grows.  
It's the grace of a lifetime,  
and the inseparable companion of faith.  
We don't repent and become faithful followers of Jesus.  
We hear Jesus, turn to him, and follow him,  
and that's how we discover our need for repentance.  
But it's also how we experience and share  
the incredible blessing of a mind changed  
by God's gracious gift of faith in Jesus.  
Thanks be to God.  
Amen.