

“The Two Sons”
Matthew 21: 28 – 32
Gunby Presbyterian Church
July 12, 2009 Picnic at the Merrill’s

Matthew 21: 28 - 32

²⁸“What do you think?”

A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go.

³¹Which 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. ³²For 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 ends the reading.

Vacation Bible School ended on Friday. It was a good week. Lots of kids, lots of adults, a decorated theme of Crocodile Dock that could rival anything the Hollywood professionals would do for a movie set, created by our own Krista d'Eustachio & friends. A lot of people say, "Yes" to Diana Shumate the organizer of our community VBS. In fact I've heard more than one person say, "I can't say no, to Miss Diana." I mean, she is an inspiration; her organization, her obvious enthusiasm for this project & her love not only of God but of each sticky balky one of us.

But not so, our story this morning. What do you think? There is little help or recognition for Jesus or for John the Baptist. And sometimes it's a little much for Jesus & so he tells a story, a parable.

This is the story of the yes & no brothers. Now probably it has never happened to you; that maybe one of your own children has said they would do something and then, lo & behold you come home from work & the wet clothes now sour are still in the dryer. Or the chicken was never put in the oven, so it is PBJ's for everyone. Or maybe a friend that you finally get up the nerve to ask for help in cutting the yard, tells you,

"Oh, no. We're going out of town that day, sorry."

But then you come home & the yard is mowed. You go over to the friend's house & he says, "Our trip was cancelled so I went ahead & got to your yard." It's a nice surprise.

But not so for Jesus or John the Baptist. Not many nice surprises. In fact, if there had been an inquest into Jesus' death, the parable of the two brothers would probably been presented as one of the things that got him killed. According to Matthew, Jesus told it during the last week of his life in Jerusalem – after he had stolen a donkey to ride into town on. After he had chased the merchants out of the temple, after he had cursed the fig tree for failing to bear fruit – after all these things he goes back to the temple to preach & to teach & that's where the chief priests & elders cornered him. The main thing they wanted to know was who had given him the authority to do all those things. Who, they wanted to know, did he think he was?

Instead of answering them, he did something that was very typical for him. He asked them a question – "What do you think?" -- and he told them a story. It took a little longer than giving them a straight answer, but Jesus was never one to give people answers they could come up with on their own. He knew truth is something people have to discover for themselves, so he went to the extra trouble of helping them do that, even when he knew it might backfire on him.

The text that Ted just read is about how Jesus told the chief priests & elders the story of the Yes & No brothers, or at least we will call them brothers. In Matthew's Greek, they are simply two children, old enough to work in the family vineyard but still working out their relationship with their father. When he asked each of them in turn to go work in the vineyard, the No brother said he would not go but later changed his mind & went. The Yes brother said he would go but never did. Which brother, Jesus asked his critics, did the will of the father?

It was an easy answer, as easy for them as it is for us. The first brother did the will of his father, of course. It wasn't what either boy said that mattered but what he finally did. Only this is not the part of the truth that got Jesus killed. What got him killed was the second part, when he told the chief priests & elders which brother they were. They were the Yes men, he told them, who said all the right things, believed all the right things, stood for all the right things, but who **would not do** the right things God asked them to do.

They *thought* they were doing the right things, mind you, but they had gotten so attached to their own ideas about what those things were that it was hard for them to accept much correction. First John the Baptist & then Jesus suggested that they trade in their beliefs for a fresh experience of

God, but they couldn't bring themselves to do that. They said yes to God while they acted out a great big NO to Jesus, who suggests they might be in for a big surprise.

People they despised were going to the kingdom ahead of them, he told them – not instead of them, but ahead of them – people who may have said no at the beginning but who changed their minds & went, while those who refused to go continued to mistake their own convictions for obedience to God.

On the one hand, it's just one more story about hypocrisy, which has always been the number one charge leveled against religious people – that we say one thing & do another, promising we will love each other on Sunday & finding a dozen ways to slander, cheat, or just plain ignore each other on Monday. It's a serious charge against those who pretend goodness, wearing a fake fur of faith in God in order to gain advantage over other people. But I don't think conscious pretense is the real problem. I'm much more concerned about the unconscious way many of us substitute our beliefs about God for our obedience to God, as if it were enough to say, "I go, sir," without ever tensing a muscle to get out of our chairs.

I don't know how it starts. Maybe we have such good imaginations that we actually believe we have done things we have really only thought about doing. Never mind God for a minute. Consider everyday life. Have you ever thought about visiting a sick friend, rehearsed what you wanted to say, decided on a nice card instead, thought about what a nice gesture that would be, congratulated yourself on your thoughtfulness, and let it go at that? I hope I'm not the only one here who has done that. I've even had a hard time later remembering whether I ever sent the card or not. I believe in doing things like that. I even believe I am the kind of person who does things like that, but sometimes I don't do them. I just roll the ideas around in my mind until I have sucked all the sweetness out of them & then I swallow them.

It's easy to get beliefs mixed up with actions. Right now I know five or ten people who believe they love their families but who spend very little time with them. I know another twenty who believe in protecting the environment but who drive cars that get less than fifteen miles to the gallon. I know about a hundred people who believe they are against violence in movies but who stand in line for the next *Transformer* sequel. And I even know people who believe in the American way but who aren't registered to vote.

It's a very peculiar thing, this vacuum between what we believe & what we actually do. The theological word for it is sin – missing the mark – which is both inevitable & forgivable -- but never tolerable for those who love God. When God is the mark we're missing, the vacuum is simply too painful to bear. It tears us up to say one thing & do another. It tears up our families, our friendships, our communities – when we say love & do indifference, or say right & do wrong, or say “I will go” & go nowhere at all. What we believe has no meaning apart from what we do about it. There is not a creed or a mission statement in the world that is worth one visit to a sick friend, or one cup of water held out to someone who is longing for it.

Maybe you have read Isak Dinesen's wonderful book, *Out of Africa*. In it, she tells the story of a young Kikuyu boy named Kitau who appeared at her door in Nairobi one day to ask if he might work for her. She said yes & he turned out to be a fine servant, but after just three months he came to her again to ask her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim in Mombasa. Upset at the thought of losing him, she offered to raise Kitau's pay, but he was firm about leaving.

He had decided he would become either a Christian or a Muslim, he explained, & his whole purpose in coming to live with her had been to see the ways & habits of Christians up close. Next he would go to live with

Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behaved & then he would make up his mind. Aghast, Dinesen wrote, "I believe that even an Archbishop, when he had had these facts laid before him, would have said, or at least thought, as I said, `Good God, Kitau, you might have told me when you came here.'"

God doesn't tell us ahead of time. Or, more to the point, God has been telling us all along – that there is no shortage of people who say, believe, or stand for all the right things. There have always been plenty of those in the world. What God is short of are people who will go where God calls them & do what God gives them to do – even say, when, it goes *against their* beliefs. To quote Soren Kierkegaard, Jesus wants followers, not admirers. Whether we say yes or no to him is apparently less important to Jesus than what we actually do. The important thing is what our lives say & they are as easy for most people to read as the story of the Yes & No brothers. To tell which one you are, look in any mirror. What is moving? Your mouth or your feet?