

20th Sunday after Pentecost – September 28, 2008
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

If I've told you once I told you a thousand times.....A parable is not a metaphor. A parable is not an allegory...regarding parables, we should not spend our time trying to decipher who is represented by whom in the story and whether we are the seeds or the weeds, the prodigal son or the stay at home complainer. The parables, as used by Jesus, were used to illustrate ONE THING about the kingdom of God.

Take for example the parable of the prodigal son. The parable of the prodigal son is misnamed, because the story, though it talks about two sons, one faithful stay at home Adam Cartwright kind of boy and one devil may care go out on the town spend the money get into trouble little Joe, the parable is not about the two sons, but rather about the loving father, an extraordinarily loving Father, who welcomes the profligate and comforts the gold watch boy.

The parable of the sower is not about weeds and rocks and sun and thorns, even though a majority of the story talks about them, instead the parable is about God and the kingdom. Picture if you will, a farmer, who has so much seed, that he scatters it everywhere he can, like a three year old scattering a 50 pound bag of grass seed. IT doesn't matter where it goes, it just does, and he's got so much of it that he doesn't HAVE to watch where it's going, half of it could wind up in his shoes or under the couch, but some of it, some of it, will produce grain and the kingdom will come. Such is the mercy and abundance of God and the inevitability of His kingdom. Therefore....

So, on to today's text. Today, the text before us from Matthew's gospel starts out with a preamble to a parable. The preamble talks about the confrontation between the chief priests and the scribes, and Jesus. Jesus had just stormed into the temple and in a rage that makes us feel somewhat good about the fact that even Jesus got angry from time to time, overturns the tables of the money changers. Now, I've told you in previous sermons that this simple act of overturning the tables in the temple was a bigger deal than you and I can imagine. First of all, the timing couldn't have been better, or worse, depending on your perspective. It was the time of year for a major Jewish holy day and thousands of people had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for it. Coming as they did from far and wide and with no

standard currency, the money changers were the equivalent of Washington Mutual, Bank of America and JP Morgan Chase and Wachovia each doing the largest piece of business they would see in a given year. People came to pray and offer sacrifice and make donations to the temple and here, in one fell swoop, Jesus upsets all their apple carts and it's a mess comparable to modern day sub prime mortgages, no one can do business.

So the chief priests and the scribes, who stand to lose the most from this recession, corner Jesus and ask him, "Who do you think you are and who gave your any authority to come in here and do what you did?"

Knowing that any answer he gave would not be the answer they wanted to hear, he instead posed his own question to them. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin? And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven, he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."

So he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things,” because the same thing applies here, you don’t know and I suspect that you don’t want to know and even if I showed you, you would not change.

And then he told them this parable.

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.

The parable of the two sons, once again, is a parable that exists to illustrate ONE THING about the kingdom God and once again, is misnamed. For is it not a parable about the two sons, although they are the main characters in the narrative. Instead, it is a parable that tells us about what kind of God we have.

Once again, the purpose of the parable is not to make you think about which son you are and thereby think better or less about yourself. Both sons were disobedient, the first because he said, “No,” and the second because he didn’t do what he said he would do. Both were disobedient and disappointed their father. That is who we are and that is the position in which we find ourselves, more often than not. With regard to doing our Father’s will, few of us, if any, are perfect in that regard. And so we’re pretty much all on equal ground here. The difference, of course, is that some recognize their fault and change their behavior. Few start off right, but some end that way, and so what matters is not who you are, or who you think you are, but rather, what you do and how you why you do it and how you change your life, or amend your life or to use a churchy word, repent. And for that, it’s never too late.

And that’s where the parable has its most power. For God, it doesn’t matter when you come around, because God is always waiting. The disobedience part is assumed, the repentance part is that for which God hopes, and God never gives up on us. Even for the tax collectors, sinners and prostitutes, God waits and offers redemption. Even for you, with all that you’ve done, even for me, with all I’ve done and with all I’ve said I’ll do and haven’t, whatever that is, and however much that is, God waits....and hopes.

For those of us who have disappointed and who have been disappointments, the God who still has faith in us can restore our self esteem. For those of us who have fallen short of the goal, who have failed to meet the expectations of others if not our own, a patient God gives us that other chance. For those of us who have made bad decisions, who have hurt the ones we love, who have fallen off the wagon, whether it be the wagon of fidelity, sobriety, integrity, or responsibility, to know that there is a God who knows us and who is willing to stop the wagon and let us hop back on, is enormously self healing and self motivating. The only ones God finds difficult to forgive are the ones who think they've done nothing wrong and thereby stand before God with an arrogance born of ignorance, reared in denial that eventually gives birth to an unrepentant self righteousness. Contemporary culture and modern day headlines give example after example. Jesus said, surely the dregs of humanity will enter the kingdom before these will.

In another part of the gospel, Jesus spoke these words to his disciples and he speaks them to us today. That's not the way it should be among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That's the way it is with the Son of Man. He did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many people." Anyone who has ears to hear should listen.

Amen.