

TWO HEARTS/TWO MINDS

Matthew 21:23-32

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 28, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 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.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

'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.

Last week, I spoke of parables of Jesus that reverse our long-standing and firmly-held beliefs about what is right and what is wrong and disrupt the moral universe in which we live: parables like that of the Prodigal Son, the Talents, and the Laborers in the Vineyard.¹

This week we encounter what appears at first glance to be an opposite kind of parable, one which confirms our most deeply-held views about right and wrong. It is called The Parable of the Two Sons.

A man owns a small vineyard.
He has two sons.
He goes to the first son and says, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today."
The son says, "I will not."

For some reason the father responds with neither a verbal tongue-lashing, a grounding of the son from video games, nor a withholding from the son of the keys to the family SUV, this being a parable from "the ancient of days" when people actually drove SUVs.

Instead, the father simply goes to his other son, and says the exact same thing: "Son, go and work in the vineyard today."

This son says, "Sir, I will go"; but as the day progresses, he remains on the sofa, surfing between ESPN and the commentary on the Presidential debates, perhaps confusing the stakes in one contest for the stakes in the other. He does not go into the vineyard.

In the meantime, the first son has changed his mind, gone into the vineyard, and worked.

This is where the parable proper ends.² One father, two sons, one working, one not, neither son showing consistency between word and deed. The beat goes on.

¹ See Larry R. Hayward, "The Many Endings of a Story," preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, September 21, 2008, available at wpc-alex.org.

² This sermon owes much to Bernard Brandon Scott's *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 79-85.

II.

There is a lot more to our passage today than just the few lines of this raw parable.

- A significant part of our passage (beyond the parable proper) deals with the relationship between Jews and non-Jews (called Gentiles); therefore it potentially speaks to the relationship between Christians and Jews today.
- Another part of the larger passage deals with the relationship between those who believe they are favored in the eyes of God and those who appear to lie well outside that favor – something that can speak to any sense of smugness we might develop in our relationship with God or with others.³

But these two subjects will have to await another day, another sermon. Today we will focus on the parable itself in its simplest, rawest form.⁴

“Son, go and work in the vineyard today.”

“I will not.”

But then this son goes.

“Son, go and work in the vineyard today.”

“Sir, I will.”

But then this son doesn't go.

III.

What do we notice about the parable proper?

- If we are oriented toward math, as some of us are, we might notice that the father speaks exactly eight words to each son and that each son responds with exactly three words. Parity in this parable, balance and equality in this family.
- If we are oriented toward the mystery of human behavior, as most of us are in some way or another, we might notice a disconnect between what each son says and what each son does, between the sons' words and the sons' deeds.
 - The first son says, “I will not go,” but then changes his mind and goes.
 - The second son says, “Sir, I will [go],” but then never gets around to going.
- If we are oriented toward matters of simple fairness, like most of us are, we might look beyond the parable proper to see which son Jesus, or Matthew, or perhaps the father favors. When we do, we find ourselves applauding what appears to be a favored position for the son who says “no” but then who comes through in the end. But such resolution is beyond the parable proper.

To summarize then:

- In the parable itself, we have two equal sons, each of whose words and deeds are inconsistent.
- We tend to favor one son, because even though he doesn't say the right thing, he does the right thing in the end, while the other son just says the right words but doesn't follow through with action. As a pragmatic people, we favor right action over right words.

Thus, we find ourselves comfortable with the moral universe this parable contains, the sense of right and wrong it depicts, the worldview it portrays. By and large, these match our own.

³ Matthew 21:23-27 deals with conflict with the religious authorities over Jesus versus John the Baptist, and Jesus' application of this parable in Matthew 21:31-32 deals with who is “confident” or “smug” in their relationship with God versus who is in greater understanding of their need for God.

⁴ Some scholars believe that Jesus' question in 21:31 is part of the parable proper; at least for the purposes of this sermon, I am siding with those scholars, like Scott, who do not.

IV.

But not so fast.

One scholar points out that that in the parable, each son brings a type of honor to the father, and each son brings a type of dishonor as well.

- By saying “No,” the first son dishonors the father with his words, perhaps even in public, but then honors him with his deeds, going into the field, upholding the family unit, supporting its survival.
- By saying “Yes,” the second son honors the father with his words, but then dishonors him with his lack of deeds, failing to support the family in its work.

In either event, the father is *honored* by both his sons and *dishonored* by both his sons.⁵ What is important about this line of thinking is this:

- In the *parable proper*, the father himself never takes a position on which son he prefers. He never indicates which son has most done his will, which son has most let him down.⁶
- Now, to be sure, in the *application* of the parable, *Jesus* asks the religious leaders this very question, and he comments favorably on their preference for the first son, but nowhere in the *parable proper* do the father, Jesus, or Matthew directly indicate a favorite.
- Like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, to which this parable is related by setting, family structure and dynamics, the father in this *parable proper* refuses to take sides between his sons, refuses to choose one over the other, refuses to deem one superior to the other.
- More importantly, the father refuses to cast either son out of the household, even though both have dishonored him in their own unique ways.

For the father, clearly, once a member of the family, always a member.⁷

IV.

What, then, might the *parable proper* – say to us?

Taking a traditional approach of assuming that in the parable the father represents God – not because the father is male and God is male but because the father and God are parental – I believe the message for us is this:

- When we honor God, we belong to God. No surprise there.
- When we dishonor God, we belong to God.
- When we *say* and do not *do*, we belong to God.
- When we *do* and do not *say*, we belong to God.
- God does not let us go when we let God go.
- God does not let us down when we let God down.
- The family of which we are part in God is not torn asunder by the failure of one of its members, for all its members fail at times.
- Likewise, the status and strength of the family is not dependent on any one member’s abilities within it, for all its members both honor and dishonor God.
- The family remains intact even when one of its members stumbles.
- And the parent in this family never casts a member aside.

**

In this parable, the word and deed of each son never meet.

- One son says “I go” and doesn’t go.
- The other son says “I will not go” but then goes.

⁵ Scott points out these two types of “honoring” and “dishonoring” and attributes them to concepts of public honor and private honor that occur in the family setting from which this parable arises.

⁶ Again, it is to Scott that I am grateful for pointing out that the question is asked of the religious leaders by Jesus, but neither Jesus, the father, nor Matthew directly or ultimately answer the question themselves.

⁷ Again, Scott focuses on the fact that neither son is cast out of the family.

Word and deed never meet with either son, yet neither son is deemed superior to the other; and neither son is discarded because of his inconsistency. The father remains father to them both.

**

This fact, and this fact alone, can have a revolutionary impact on our lives.

It can drive us to a place that never appears directly in the parable:

- the place where word and deed match;
- the place where we honor God with both our words and our deeds;
- the place where, because we have not been cast aside when our words and deeds clash, we strive to honor God
 - free from guilt
 - free from obligation
 - free from fear
 - free from judgment or its threat

by doing our best to bring word and deed together.

**

A father has two sons.
One says "I will go" but does not go.
Another says "I will not go" but goes.
The father never chooses one son over the other.
Both remain residents in the father's house,
Members of the father's household

**

Imagine what it would be like
To honor God with word but not deed
And still be a part of God's family.
Imagine what it would be like
To honor God with deed but not word
And still be part of God's family.

Imagine what it would be like to have a God like that.

Doesn't it lead us
More than anything else
To seek that place
Where word and deed
Are one,
Inseparable,
Indivisible,
Where word and deed
Together,
Honor God?

Imagine.
Imagine well.
For that is
The God we have.