

“Work”

Matthew 21:23-32

October 1, 2017

How often have you asked your child, to do something, and they balk, refuse and “take an attitude?” Then, you look over and there the kid is doing the task.

How often have you asked your child, to do something, and they say “Sure, no problem.” And then, an hour later, or a day later, you see that the job or task has not been done?

What’s a father, a parent to do? What is the source of authority? God is the source of all authority. We live in that tension, as we journey through this life on earth; with faith In Jesus Christ. Spiritual over physical.

There is often so much we do not know about a situation; yet we find ourselves judging the actions (or inactions) of people.

In this parable here are some things we do not know:

- We don’t know if this behavior (*) was typical of the sons or extraordinary.
- We don’t know what interaction or conversation the sons may have had with each other (or with their father) after their initial response.
- We don’t know what may have prevented (or enticed) either of the sons to act opposite to their earlier statements.
- And we don’t even know exactly why Jesus told this parable.

What do we know?

- Well, mainly that the son who said he’d show up and work did not and the son who at first refused changed his mind and did.
- We also know that most of those listening would probably agree with the maxim that “actions speak louder than words” and therefore believe that the first son, despite his abrupt, if not somewhat obnoxious, refusal of his father’s command is the one who “did the will of his father.” He responded to the authority.

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- And we know that Jesus links this parable to the response of the tax collectors and prostitutes; (those considered beyond the pale of respectable society) to the good news of the coming kingdom.

As you study scripture and as you think about what you know about people and their actions around you; this can be a valuable exercise because a lot of what we don't know has to do with motivation and circumstances – not only these boys in the parable, but also how you and I guess and second guess actions of our fellow worshippers and the people we meet at work and on the street. Where do they place the authority that drives their lives?

- We don't know what motivates many folks to come to church or for that matter to not come to church.
- We don't know what motivates one parishioner to give so generously and another who could easily give more generously (as far as we can tell) could do the same yet doesn't. (Is God a God of abundance?)
- We don't know what collection of experiences shapes the religious and political beliefs of our fellow parishioners.
- We don't know why a couple in our congregation may be struggling in their marriage or why another always seems like such a thorn in our side or why yet another seems so predictably contrary while someone else is so unfailingly gracious.

We don't know these things. We may guess – just as we may guess about our questions related to this parable and its characters – we may make assumptions and judgments, but ultimately, we don't know.

Therefore, we should introduce a modicum of caution, **if not humility**, in our judgments, about these characters and even more about the people with whom we live and worship.

This parable and its placement at this part of Matthew's Gospel serves both to highlight the heightened tension between Jesus and the religious authorities of this day and to build the case against those same religious leaders for their failure:

1. their failure to answer Jesus' question about John's authority,

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2. their failure to accept his message,
3. and their failure to recognize Jesus as God's promised Messiah.

But thinking outside the box, I wonder if this parable does not also offer the world a word of **surprise and hope**. Indeed, perhaps many words of surprise and hope.

Here are just a few.

- I hear in this parable the surprising possibility of hope that someone who has refused to listen to God, but may yet change his/her mind.
- There is Hope that it's never too late to respond to the grace of the Gospel.
- We all live with the hope that our past actions or current status does not determine a person's future.
- Hope that even those whom we believe to be good folk – and, [lest we forget, the chief priests and elders were good folk – and they are in many ways the first-century equivalent of our church council members, elders, altar guild members, significant givers, and Sunday school teachers] – good folk cannot rightly judge that some people are beyond the pale of decent society and that those people **are never, ever** *beyond the reach of God*.

There is hope ... no matter what may have happened in the past, God is eager to meet us in the present and offer us – indeed, secure for us – an open future.

It is not too late. God is here, inviting each of us into the kingdom that not only lives out in front of us but has the capacity to shape our every moment from this time forward.

This is essentially what Paul Tillich meant with his phrase and sermon **“the eternal now.”**

Each moment we live is pregnant with the possibility of receiving God's grace, repenting of things we've done and/or forgiving and letting go of things that were done to us. We are invited to return to a right relationship with God and with those around us, and receiving the future as open rather than determined.

God's promise is about an open future that will shape our present here and now. And so

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- I invite you to give your attention to this promise about the future
- Look inside yourself for those things that are holding you back from receiving God's promises.
- What things are you holding onto that make it difficult to believe and accept God's forgiveness?
- Will you imagine that the future can be different than the past?
 - Look around at others in the congregation.
 - You did not all vote for our current president and many of you feel quite strongly about that vote,
 - Some of you are annoyed or offended by NFL players who take a knee during the national anthem and many others applaud them,
 - Many people are optimistic about the future and
 - Some people are frightened,
 - There are some people who feel great about HAGL and there are those who those who don't like particular decisions.
 - The list can go on and on.

We don't know the motivations or experiences of the people who act differently from the way we act, **but we do know** that God is reaching out to each one of them with the gift of acceptance and love and forgiveness that are the hallmarks of the kingdom Jesus proclaims. People of faith who take action, are called to action because of their commitment to the authority of God.

We live in a time of such division. Important values, beliefs, and concerns underlie some of those divisions. Christians, we need to remind ourselves that beneath all of these differences is a profound commonality and solidarity in that we are each a child of God whom God loves, adores, and is speaking to right here and now. This is my Father's world ... Our Father who is in heaven.

Take more **time to listen** to each other, try to understand each other, and try to listen for God's calling for ourselves and our community together, instead of isolation?

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God is present in our worship, reaching out to us in ***the eternal now*** of God's grace, love, and acceptance to call us to hope-filled and purposeful lives of service to our neighbor.

Recognize it.

As God invites you to once again to see, accept, actualize, and respond to God's amazing grace and live into the future that God has prepared for us.

AMEN

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