

Sermon Proper 21 A

September 28, 2008

St. John's Episcopal Church, Jamaica Plain

Whatever else you might say about Jesus, you can certainly say that he had what my New York friends would call “chutzpah!” Best translated as audacity or nerve, it sums up admirably the tone that Jesus took with the religious authorities in today's gospel. We've heard these exchanges between Jesus and the religious leaders so many times that they may have lost their shock value. But, remember, Jesus is talking to the people in charge! The religious establishment. Which **he** isn't, by the way! Carrying on a dialogue throughout the gospels with men who really mattered and who had enormous power. You don't need to be clairvoyant to see where this could lead for Jesus. To a charge of blasphemy, to an arrest and an execution.

But we are not there yet. We are here this morning listening to Jesus tell the leaders a story. A story they both **completely understood** and **didn't like**. A man had two sons. We sometimes think of these sons as symbolizing the Jews and the Christians, or the Jews and the Gentiles. But, for Jesus the sons represent two different groups within Judaism. After all, Jesus is a Jew speaking to Jews. Jesus is contrasting the religious leaders

with the faithful ones, the people whom the leadership thought you could call outcast. The people whom the leaders considered beyond the scope of God's mercy because of who they were- prostitutes and sinners, the unclean, those on the margins of the society.

But, in Jesus' telling of the story one son, representing the leaders, is not obedient to God. Does not do what the father wants even though he says he will. Obedience is the key ingredient here. And the other son, representing the faithful outcasts, who initially refuses, changes his mind. Conversion is the key ingredient here. Obedience and conversion. Both are central to a faithful life.

Now, I am an only child. So, often stories that begin, there were two sons, (Cain and Abel, the elder good son and the Prodigal Son), or there were two sisters, (Mary and Martha), don't immediately resonate with me. I don't know what it's like to have a sibling. But sometimes you don't need brothers and sisters to understand the pairing in the Bible stories.

Sometimes **we are both** the elder son and the Prodigal Son, sometimes we are both Mary and Martha. Sometimes, God help us, we are even Cain and Abel. So, I would ask all the only children here today to join with all the people who have siblings and together let us enter this story that Jesus tells us.

Which son are we? The one who knows who is “in” and who is “out?” The one with moral surety about those whom God favors and those whom God has cast away? An approved list that we carry around in our heads? The one who is convinced that he is on the right track and is all set?

Or the other one? The one who feels himself to be “out” in some way, not in synch with the powers that be. Who recognizes that God’s mercy and compassion are essential just to carry on. Who knows that in God’s kingdom there aren’t approved lists anymore! That God invites to paradise people we wouldn’t invite to lunch!

I had a student once in a World Religions class who was very angry at our belief that God welcomes sinners. She told me, amid fits of fuming, that she had a deeply religious grandmother back in Sicily. Her grandmother always went to Mass and said her prayers and did good works. And was I actually saying that God would welcome scuzbags and criminals and axe-murderers into heaven along with her sainted grandmother?

“That’s simply not fair!” she snapped.

“Does your grandmother think it’s unfair?” I asked her.

She didn’t know. But, if her grandmother was as holy as she said, I knew she’d be thrilled that God was so merciful!

See the key here is that you only rejoice that God is merciful and lavish with grace if you can see yourself on the outside of the circle. If you are on the inside of the circle then this is not good news. It just means that riff raff will start to crowd in and take the best places, the ones you thought were reserved for you!

Are we the son who starts by saying “No” but then changes his mind? Throughout the gospels there is a call to change your mind. Indeed, it is a constant theme through the whole Bible and the Qur’an. Hearing God’s word and changing so that we do it. Easier said than done! I am often wrong but never unsure! I remain convinced that my opinion is correct until someone finally disabuses me of it. Maybe you are the same. So, what can get us to change our minds? Believing in our bones that God is still at work in the world. That God is still able to upset our categories, point us in new directions, do surprising and amazing things. If we face each day knowing that God has gotten up earlier and is already up to God’s elbows in changing the world, then our task is to go and see where God is already at work and join in! What this means is that God’s Holy Spirit can draw us to places and people and causes that we might not ordinarily encounter. What this means is that we need to wear our opinions and customs like a loose garment which can be sloughed off and changed at a moment’s notice. What

this means is that if we have approved lists we better go home and rip them up. If we have non-negotiables with God, we better have another conversation! What this means is that no matter what we already think about anything, we need to be spiritually flexible enough to change our minds. But, as I already said, this is easier said than done!

The ability to change our minds is at the heart of the gospel. And at the heart of life in community. It's one of the reasons Christianity requires a community. To listen together to where God is leading us, to challenge one another to venture forth to new places where we believe God is already at work. To keep one another honest and on the right track, to gently draw each other back from self-delusion and self-importance and just plain stubbornness about our valued opinions and our set ways of doing things. If you have such a community here at St. John's, give thanks to God. It is a gift. A prickly pear at times, perhaps, but God's gift all the same! If you want the community to help you change your mind then ask God to shape this community into one focused on obedience and conversion. And keep asking. And then just wait and see what God can do!

A man had two sons. Which one do you want to be? What are you willing to change so that you can be?

May God make it so! Amen.

