

PENTECOST XV

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." Matthew 21: 28

One of the high points of my teenage years was the week I spent at church camp every summer of high school. Does that sound pathetic and nerdy? Well, whatever, it's the truth. I loved being with other kids who loved church as much as I did; loved being in a beautiful place where we could talk about God and the bible and also do plenty of swimming.

I have many happy memories of the times spent at Camp O-at-ka and later Camp Bishopswood, though not a whole lot of memories of what I may have learned about the bible. I do remember, in a morning bible study, the priest who was leading the class asking us what a parable was. After a dumbstruck silence, someone said, "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." The priest's reaction was somewhere between disgusted and horrified.

Either I never knew, or don't remember, what prompted that response. Did our teacher think the answer was misleading or just plain wrong? Too pious? Or was it a kind of rivalrous reaction? Well, I'll never know now.

As far as I can tell, from my years in the business, the answer, *an earthly story with a heavenly meaning*, while a bit pious and also a bit vague, is not so far from the mark. When Jesus spoke in parables, or when the gospelists have him speak in parables, he uses stories and examples that draw on the experience of his listeners in ancient Palestine. He draws on the familiarities of agriculture (sowing seeds,

harvesting crops, lean years and fat years) ;of governance (kings and lords, servants and slaves); and of social strata (rich and poor). He speaks in language that the humblest of his followers can understand.

But that doesn't mean that they always *do* understand. Nor, that we do to day. His parables are meant to illustrate God's qualities, God's actions, God's economy. And God and God's mind and heart are very different from our own. That's why God is God, and we are not. Therefore, if we try to take all the parables as descriptions or prescriptions for our own lives, we are apt to feel befuddled or even angry. Last week, for example, we heard about a landlord who paid all his workers the same whether they started work first thing in the morning, or at 5.00 p.m. I think we'd all have a problem with that, wouldn't we? The story seems so manifestly unfair! So unfair that even biblical scholars often have trouble rationalizing it.

But that story is meant to demonstrate, to witness to, what our great hymn calls *the wideness of God's mercy*. It tells us, I think, that whether we enter God's service early or late in our lives, we can expect to be received with gladness and to receive all the benefits of God's loving-kindness. And would we want it any other way? Would we truly want latecomers to the Good News to be treated less lovingly than ourselves? If so, we haven't really absorbed the Good News.

But today's parable is one that can apply equally to God's justice and our own. One son tells his father that he'll go work in the vineyard, and then slacks off. The other rebels and says he won't go, but then changes his mind and goes. *Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first."* Everybody gets this one!

Everyone gets this one because we all know both types. We know the eager-to-please folks who promise ambitiously, and then may never be heard from again. And

we know the reluctant ones who may resent being asked, may be slow to commit, but then become diligent and faithful workers. *Which of the two did the will of his father?*

This is a variant of the common wisdom that a slow yes is better than a fast no. What Jesus is saying here is, *a slow yes is better than a fast yes.*

Actually, these two sons sound like two variants of teenage rebels. They both act out, in different ways: the first rejects his father's orders verbally but then obeys, the other he says he'll go work, and then he doesn't. He's eager to appear to please, but not willing to serve.

Here, God's values and God's economy seem to mirror our own. God values diligence. God values follow-through.

I read a very fine article in the NYTimes magazine last Sunday, an article I'd commend to every parent and every teacher and indeed, everyone interested in character building and in learning. The title: **What if the Secret to Success Is Failure?** and, appropriately enough, the author's name is Paul Tough. The article's about two educators in very different schools *who have found themselves wrestling with questions that have long confounded not just educators but anyone trying to nurture a thriving child or simply live a good life. What is good character? Is it really something that can be taught in a formal way, in the classroom, or is it the responsibility of the family, something that is inculcated gradually over years of experience? Which qualities matter most for a child trying to negotiate his way to a successful and autonomous adulthood?*

Here's one thing the educators found; *the students who persisted in college were not necessarily the ones who had excelled academically; they were the ones with exceptional character strengths, like optimism and persistence and social intelligence. They were the ones who were able to recover from a bad grade and resolve to do better*

next time; to bounce back from a fight with their parents; to resist the urge to go out to the movies and stay home and study instead; to persuade professors to give them extra help after class. (NYTIMES Magazine, 9.18.11)

In huge typeface overlaying the pictures in this article are the words GRIT, ZEST, and CURIOSITY. And there's a lot of attention paid to grit, persistence, determination, including reference to a GRIT test that you can find online and take, if you are interested, as I was.

So in this case, life seems to reward the same virtues as God values. Determination, persistence, follow-through. Or what we call faithfulness. A quality I've learned to value above most others in my life and in my work.

In this world, and in God's heaven, we don't all have to be smart, we don't all have to be rich. These are not the predictors of success or personal happiness, and they are not the most highly valued of attributes. Willingness to work, to contribute to the common good, to establish goals and persevere toward them; these are qualities of high esteem. Along, of course, with love and forgiveness, those baselines of Christian life.

I like to think these qualities abound here at St. John's. We are not perhaps the most genius group ever gathered together. (sorry) We are certainly not the richest. But in terms of commitment, faithfulness, and just plain grit, I think we can commend ourselves. And of course, we have Jesus with us and among us *to guide our feet as we run this race.* Alleluia, Amen.