

## Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 27, 2020

### Reading / Lesung: Matthew 21:23-32

<sup>23</sup>Jesus entered the Temple precincts and began teaching. The chief priests and the elders of the people came to him and said, "By what authority are you doing what you do? Who gave you this authority?"

<sup>24</sup>"And I," replied Jesus, "will ask you a single question; if you give me the answer, I will tell you my authority for these actions. <sup>25</sup>What was the origin of John's right to baptize? Was it divine or was it human?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'divine,' he will respond, 'Then why did you refuse to believe him?' <sup>26</sup>But if we say 'human,' we have the people to fear, for they regard John as a prophet." <sup>27</sup>So they replied to Jesus, "We don't know." Jesus said in reply, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

<sup>28</sup>Jesus continued, "What do you think? There was a landowner who had two children. The landowner approached the elder and said, 'My child, go out and work in the vineyard today.'

<sup>29</sup>This first child replied, 'No, I won't,' but afterwards regretted it and went. <sup>30</sup>The landowner then came to the second child and said the same thing. The second child said in reply, 'I'm on my way,' but never went. <sup>31</sup>Which of the two did what was wanted?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "The truth is, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. <sup>32</sup>When John came walking on the road of justice, you didn't believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you didn't repent and believe.

**Amen.**

### Sermon / Predigt, Vicar Silke Fahl

What a layered text! And so full of different theological topics! There is the question about Jesus' authority and the authority of John the Baptist. The question of what it means to do God's will and who will enter the kingdom of God first. We also could talk about baptism or what repenting means.

But before we focus on one of those topics, let us have a look at the setting and the people. Jesus is in Jerusalem. In the temple in Jerusalem to be exact. And he is being approached by the highest authority in the temple and among the Jewish people: the high priests and the elders. The only people higher up in the hierarchy were Roman officials. So, it's not just anyone who approaches Jesus. Which also explains their reluctance at the beginning, for they aren't necessarily bad people. Even though they are often depicted that way in the New Testament. But they do what they think they have to do to keep order. For if it comes to an uprising or something the Romans would step in and people would most likely lose their lives.

In their eyes Jesus is a threat to that. So, they want to know with who's authority he is speaking and doing all the things he's doing. For he is different than the other itinerant preachers of the time. Every single thing he does and says is highly political.

Thus, they approach Jesus and question him. But instead of giving them a straight answer, Jesus asks a question in return and then follows that question with a parable. To us that seems weird. But that is not only typical for Jesus, but in fact the common way of debate in his time. Anyway, it's this parable I'd like to have a closer look at today.

So let us hear the parable once more:

<sup>28</sup> Jesus continued, "What do you think? There was a landowner who had two children. The landowner approached the elder and said, 'My child, go out and work in the vineyard today.'  
<sup>29</sup> This first child replied, 'No, I won't,' but afterwards regretted it and went. <sup>30</sup> The landowner then came to the second child and said the same thing. The second child said in reply, 'I'm on my way,' but never went. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did what was wanted?" They said, "The first."

When it comes to Jesus' parables, well, any text in the Bible really, I always ask myself a couple of questions:

1. Can I imagine being one of the people in this story? Can I relate to this parable?

If I tried to relate to every detail in the text exactly as it is, then no. For I have neither children nor a vineyard. But: I've experienced similar situations more than once in my life where someone said no, but in the end did as they were asked anyway. Or someone said yes, but nothing ever got done.

I'm going to hazard a guess and say that story is one we can all relate to in one way or another. Maybe you have asked your children, siblings, or co-workers to do something, they said they would, but they didn't. Or you have been asked to do something and first said no and then felt bad about saying no and thus went ahead and did it after all. I think we all have been both of these sons at one point or another. In my experience it is rarely, if ever, out of malicious intent if we act that way. Especially if we don't do something, we said we would. Sometimes our to-do lists are simply so long and overwhelming that we forget things or don't have the time or energy for it.

It's the same with the two sons in the story. We simply do not know why they say and act the way they do. Maybe they are rebellious teenagers. Or maybe they have a good, or at least understandable reason for their behaviour. We simply don't know and apparently it wasn't important to Jesus in order to relay the message he was trying to give the high priests and elders.

Let us have a look at my other two questions:

2. What does the parable, what does Jesus try to tell us? And is this parable supposed to be an encouragement or an admonition?

I'd like to make a case and say that whether you read this parable as an encouragement or an admonition depends on from which point of view you read this text. Do you read it from the point of view of the first son? Or do you see yourself more in the second son? If I relate more to the first son, I'll most likely read this text as an encouragement. Yet if I read it from the point of view of the second son, it sounds more like an admonition. Or maybe we see ourselves in both sons and the parable sounds like an encouragement and an admonition at once.

That still leaves the question what Jesus is trying to tell us. He basically explains it at the end when he says, "*The truth is, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you.*" <sup>32</sup> *When John came walking on the road of justice, you didn't believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you didn't repent and believe.*"

But what does that mean for us? None of us are high priests or elders at the temple in

Jerusalem. And I don't know if anyone here or at home has one of the other two jobs mentioned in this parable. Two jobs who were regarded as extremely negative for various reasons. But none of that matters for Jesus uses those two jobs as an example to make his point. Examples that went straight to the core of the people he was talking to.

What Jesus wants to say is this: No matter what we may have done, when we regret what we did and repent, we will join him in the heavenly kingdom.

Amen.

*"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

Amen.

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