

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 1, 2023 (Proper 21, Year A)
Matthew 21:23-32
Philippians 2:1-13

A father once tried to talk to his son when he went to college. The father said, "How are things going?" The son said, "Good." The father said, "And the dormitory?" He said, "Good." The father said, "How are your studies going?" He said, "Good." The father said, "Have you decided on a major yet?" He said, "Yes." "Well, what is it?" asked the father. The son said, "Communication."

So it goes, as parents and children try to talk to each other. So it was for the two sons in Jesus' story. One son says "no" to his father, but then changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard. The other son says "yes" to his father, but DOESN'T go. NEITHER son communicated very well, but "which of the two sons did the WILL of his father?" Jesus asked. It was the FIRST son. As the saying goes, "mean what you say, and say what you mean." Or as James 5:12 puts it, "Let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no.

ACTIONS speak LOUDER than words. Writer Elizabeth Sherrill tells of visiting the ice-skating rink at Rockefeller Center in New York City. Dozens of people skated around the rink. But in the CENTER of the rink was a lovely blond woman in an attractive skater's outfit. This woman was stretching and posing, stretching and posing. Elizabeth waited expectantly for this lovely young woman to finish with her posing and begin skating. But she NEVER DID.

On other visits to the rink, Elizabeth saw this woman again. She was always dressed like a professional skater. And she spent lots of time doing skater's poses. But she NEVER SKATED. Not once did she take a turn around the rink. She was all appearance and no substance.

For many of us, that hits TOO close to home. We may LOOK like followers of Jesus, we may even TALK like followers of Jesus, but deep in our HEARTS, we know it's only "stretching and posing."

If we're honest about it, just about the ONLY place we feel comfortable making BOLD statements about our religion and our allegiance to GOD is in CHURCH on Sunday morning. In our hymns we sing, "Stand up, Stand up for Jesus." In our confession of faith, we say, "I BELIEVE in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord." And when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "YOUR kingdom come, YOUR will be done, on EARTH as in heaven."

And that's wonderful. But do we to LIVE UP to those Sunday morning promises on MONDAY morning? We leave the church on Sunday feeling good about ourselves, having managed to make it through another worship service without falling asleep (well, MOST of the time), believing that just our PRESENCE here shows that we're loyal children of God. But all too often, those verbal commitments we make through hymns, prayers, and confessions of faith DON'T CHANGE ANYTHING about the way we LIVE on MONDAY.

TOO often, our MONDAY morning faith seems TOTALLY UNRELATED to our SUNDAY morning pronouncements, and our Monday morning ACTIONS make a MOCKERY of what we SAID in church on SUNDAY morning.

In the Luther Seminary online devotion "God Pause," this week, Pastor Dennis R. Creswell wrote about a proverb from his childhood: "What they DO speaks SO LOUD that I can't HEAR what they say.' My mother would use (that) to EXPLAIN why the way some people ACTED made what they SAID UNTRUE."

Jesus' parable of the two brothers points out that we answer "yes" and "no" to God with our ACTIONS, just as MUCH as with our WORDS. We can say "yes" with our mouths, but LIVE a "no"; another person might say "no," but in the END discover that they have LIVED a "yes."

This story reminds me of my teenage children. I tell them to do something and their FIRST response is ALWAYS "in a few minutes" or "later," which really means "no," because the never come back, but after I remind them a couple DOZEN times, or take their PHONE away, they do it, but they grumble and complain and slam things around and do a really POOR job at it.

Now, am I PLEASED by that? They OBEY me, but is doing it begrudgingly and sloppily REALLY what I WANT?

The same is true in our relationship with our heavenly Father. Is simple OBEDIENCE really doing the WILL of the Father?

Shouldn't there be a THIRD option? Shouldn't there be a THIRD child who promises to do something and then faithfully DOES that very thing.

Oh, I wish there WAS. It would be WONDERFUL to ask my child to do something and have them respond, "Oh YES, Father, I would LOVE to do this thing for you, and it's so IMPORTANT to me that I will do it RIGHT NOW!" That would be awesome.

But when Jesus tells the parable, there ISN'T a THIRD child. Why? Because Jesus lives in the REAL world. In the REAL world, there's NO SUCH THING as PERFECT people.

What STRIKES me about this passage is that Jesus isn't CALLING for PERFECTION, NOR is he DEMANDING BLIND OBEDIENCE; he's commending those who are willing to CHANGE.

The son who changed his MIND is the one who did the will of his father, but it actually goes DEEPER than that, DEEPER than JUST OBEDIENCE.

The word USED here is DIFFERENT from the one USUALLY used for "changing your mind." THIS word has a sense of "changing what you CARE about" or "changing what you're MOST CONCERNED about." WHATEVER it WAS that was MORE IMPORTANT to him than serving his father, WASN'T so important to him any LONGER. He realized that NONE of the things that were KEEPING him SO BUSY were as IMPORTANT as, not just OBEYING, but SERVING his FATHER. He didn't just change his mind; he had a change of HEART.

The OTHER son, who said yes at first, but didn't go? He didn't change his heart at ALL. He NEVER INTENDED to go to work. He was just "stretching and posing."

Jesus says that the prostitutes and tax collectors are going into the kingdom of God ahead of the POSERS, because they BELIEVED, and that CHANGE of HEART changed their LIVES.

This parable isn't JUST about saying or doing the right things, JUST OBEDIENCE or duty; it's about our RELATIONSHIP with the FATHER.

It's not just your WORDS and your WORK that matter, but more importantly, what you WANT. WHY do you do what you do? God doesn't ONLY want your hands and your head; God wants your HEART.

As Paul says in our second reading, "Let the SAME MIND be in YOU that was in Christ Jesus." We KNOW the heart and mind of CHRIST was ALWAYS the WILL of his Father, but listen to what Paul says next: "Therefore, my beloved...work OUT your OWN SALVATION with fear and trembling; for it is GOD who is at work IN you, ENABLING you BOTH to WILL AND to WORK for his good pleasure."

God is WORKING IN you, so that your words, your WORK, AND what you WANT ALL 3, say the SAME THING.

May YOU WILL to do GOD'S work, and WORK to do GOD'S WILL. I PRAY that your "Yes" will MEAN something, not just to OTHER people, but to YOU, and, more IMPORTANTLY, to GOD. Amen.