

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

September 27, 2020 (Proper 21, Year A)  
Matthew 21:23-32  
Philippians 2:1-13

A successful business man was growing old and knew it was time to choose a successor to take over the business. He called together all the young executives in his company, and he said, "It's time for me to step down and choose the next CEO. I've decided to choose one of you." The young executives were shocked, but the boss continued. "I'm going to give each one of you a seed today, a very SPECIAL seed. I want you to plant the seed, water it, and come back here one year from today with what you have grown from the seed I have given you. I'll judge the plants that you bring, and the one I choose will be the next CEO"

One man, named Jim, like the others, received a seed. He went home and excitedly told his wife the story. She helped him get a pot, soil and compost and he planted the seed. Every day, he would water it and watch to see if it had grown. After about three weeks, some of the other executives began to talk about THEIR seeds and the plants that were beginning to grow. Jim kept CHECKING his seed, but nothing ever grew. Three weeks, four weeks, five weeks went by, still nothing. By now, OTHERS were talking about their plants, but Jim didn't HAVE a plant, and he felt like a failure.

Six months went by – still nothing in Jim's pot. He just knew he'd killed his seed. Everyone else had trees and tall plants, but HE had nothing. Jim didn't SAY anything to his colleagues; he just kept watering and fertilizing the soil. He SO wanted the seed to grow.

A YEAR went by and all the young executives of the company brought their plants to the CEO for inspection. Jim told his wife that he wasn't going to take an EMPTY pot. But she asked him to be honest about what happened. Jim felt sick to his stomach, it was going to be the most embarrassing moment of his life, but he knew his wife was right. He took his empty pot to the board room.

When he arrived, he was AMAZED at the variety of plants grown by the other executives. They were beautiful – in all shapes and sizes. Jim put his empty pot on the floor and many of his colleagues LAUGHED. A few felt sorry for him!

When the CEO arrived, he surveyed the room and greeted his young executives. Jim just tried to hide in the back. "My, what great plants, trees, and flowers you have grown," said the CEO. "Today one of you will be appointed the next CEO!" Suddenly, the CEO spotted Jim at the back of the room with his empty pot. He ordered the financial director to bring him to the front. Jim was terrified. He thought, "The CEO knows I'm a failure! Maybe he'll fire me!" When Jim got to the front, the CEO asked him what had happened to his seed, and Jim told him the story. The CEO then announced to the young executives, "Behold your next Chief Executive!

"How could HE be the new CEO?" the others said. "All he brought was an empty pot!"

Then the CEO said, "One year ago today, I gave everyone in this room a seed. But I gave you all BOILED seeds; they were dead – it wasn't POSSIBLE for them to grow. ALL of you, except Jim here, have brought me trees and plants and flowers. When you found that the seed wouldn't grow, you substituted ANOTHER seed for the one I gave you. Jim was the ONLY one with the courage and the honesty to bring me a pot with MY seed in it. Therefore, HE'S the one who will be the new Chief Executive!"

Integrity.

Today we heard Jesus tell a parable ABOUT integrity. Jesus tells a story about 2 sons. One son says "no," but then changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard. The other son says "yes," but DOESN'T go. "Which of the two sons did the will of his father?" Jesus asked. It was the FIRST son. Your words need to match your actions, and your actions need to match your words. Actions speak LOUDER than words. 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.

All this is true, but there's more going on here than meets the eye. Is that first son REALLY doing the will of the father? Most of us, LIKE the chief priests, would SAY the first WAS, but isn't that just the LESSER of two EVILS?

I'm reminded of my teenage children. I tell them to do something and their first response is always no, but after I yell at them, they do it, but they grumble and complain and slam things around do a really poor job at it. Am I pleased by that? Is that REALLY what I WANTED? Is that really doing the will of the Father?

Don't you wish there was a THIRD option?

When Jesus tells the parable, why ISN'T there a THIRD son who promises to do one thing and then faithfully DOES that very thing? Because Jesus lives in the REAL world. In the REAL world, integrity isn't easy. In real LIFE, integrity means making choices.

And that's what HAPPENS in the parable. It says the first son "changed his mind," but it goes DEEPER than that. The word used here is different from the one USUALLY used for "changing one's mind." THIS word has a sense of "changing what one CARES about" or "changing what one is MOST CONCERNED about." WHATEVER it was that was more important to him BEFORE than serving his father, WASN'T so important anymore. He realized that none of the things that were keeping him so busy were as important as obeying his father. He didn't just change his mind; he had a change of heart.

And that's what BOTH sons needed. BOTH sons needed a change in heart. And there's no THIRD son in the story, because NO ONE is perfect. We are ALL somewhere in BETWEEN.

A young minister graduated from seminary just before World War I, and he was appointed to a church in a very small town. He'd been there only a couple of weeks when he received the call every NEW minister dreads – the call to do his first funeral.

The person who had died was not a member of his church. She was, in fact, a woman with a very bad reputation. Her husband was a railroad engineer who was away from home most of the time. She'd rented rooms in their house to men who worked on the railroad, and rumor had it that she rented MORE than just rooms when her husband was away.

The young preacher, faced with his first funeral, found NO ONE who had a good word to say about this woman, NO ONE, until he went to the small old-fashioned grocery store on the day before the funeral. He began to talk to the store owner about his sadness that the FIRST person he would bury would be someone about whom nothing GOOD could be said. The store owner didn't reply at first and then, in his silence, he appeared to make a decision. He took out his store ledger and laid it on the counter between him and the preacher. He opened the ledger at random and, covering the names in the left-hand column, he pointed to grocery bills written in red – groceries that people had bought on credit – and then the column that showed the bill had been paid.

He said, "Every month, that woman would come in and ask me who was behind in their grocery bills. It was usually some family who had sickness or death – or some poor woman trying to feed her kids when her husband drank up the money. She would pay their bill and she made me SWEAR never to tell. But, I figure now that she's dead, people ought to know – especially those who benefited from her charity who have been most critical of her."

Now, who would you say was doing the will of God? The immoral woman, or the people who criticized her? BOTH needed their hearts to be changed.

Once there were two couples. Couple A were married in a large, beautiful church ceremony. They pledged life-long faithfulness and love to each other in their vows. But their life together has been one of abuse – both verbal and physical. And they both have been unfaithful to each other.

Couple B live together. They had no public ceremony. They signed no marriage license. They spoke no vows in the presence of witnesses. But THEIR life together is a loving and affirming relationship. And they HAVE remained faithful to each other.

Which couple would you say is doing the will of God? BOTH need a change of hearts – couple A in the way they act towards each other, and couple B in their attitudes about the importance of marriage.

What about those who attend church and say all the right words, but whose lives fall short of the "way of righteousness," and OTHERS who live GOOD and HONEST lives, but who want NOTHING to do with "organized religion"? BOTH need "a change of heart".

The primary point of this parable isn't JUST about saying or doing the right things; it's about having a change in heart. REAL integrity isn't just obedience or duty. It comes FROM our relationship with the Father. It's not just your words and your work that matter, but more importantly, your WILL. WHY do you do what you do? God doesn't JUST 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 how FAR Jesus went for our salvation, 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 your WILL will always say the same thing.

May YOU WILL to do God's work, and WORK to do God's WILL. GIVE God your empty pot; give him your heart. It's all he ever REALLY WANTED. Amen.