

“The Will of the Father”

Matthew 21 23-32

For the last few weeks, Matthew has told us story after story that calls us to take another look at how we as people of faith respond to the Good News, how we as believers respond to the gift of God’s grace, story after story that asks us just exactly how we will respond to God’s call, how we will respond when called to become the people God created us to be, regardless of how difficult the call may be to follow or uncomfortable the call may make us feel. And this week is no different. Today, we get the parable of the two sons, a text that forces us as church people, as insiders, as the ones who are supposed to get it, to face some hard facts about ourselves, a text that forces us to admit that sometimes we don’t always do the will of the Father, despite what we may say or think, especially when it comes down to actually following God’s call in our lives.

This text holds up a mirror in front of our faces and shows us the harsh truth that sometimes there is a disconnect between our actions and our deeds as the church, as the heart and hands of God here on earth, as the people of God, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come near.

But if we are truly honest with ourselves, we don’t need this particular text to hold this mirror up to our faces to see this ugly truth. All we had to do is listen to

the voices of those people who are leaving the church, frustrated and angry. All we had to do is listen to the voices of the people who will never step foot into a church again because all they experienced while there was how the church could hurt others rather than offer healing to those that need it. For us to face the harsh reality of a disconnect between our words and deeds as the church, we really didn't need Matthew to tell us the parable of the two sons. All we have to do was listen to the voices of those people who have left the Church for good and now will only say that they are "Spiritual but not religions" to learn that we as the church are not getting it, that we as the supposed insiders are missing the point of the Good News, that we, the heart and hands of God on earth, have not truly lived out our call to share God's love, God's compassion, and God's grace with all of God's people.

Because if we listen closely to these voices, they are saying that as the Church, we don't practice what we preach. Because these voices are saying that as the church, we act more like a country club than a place of grace and acceptance. Because if we listen closely to these voices, they are saying that as the Church, we care more about getting numbers into our pews than caring for God's children. Because these voices are saying, the Church is more worried about itself and maintaining the status quo than going out into the community and connecting with the people who really need to hear some good news.

For us as insiders, for those of us who have grown up in the church culture, these voices and what they are saying about us, seem a little harsh but it is exactly what we need to hear, just like the church needed to hear them back then when Matthew first told this parable to his community of faith. It was a wake up call for the church back then and it remains a wake up call for the church today. We need to listen to where God is speaking to us through this parable and respond to the will of the Father as people of faith.

And as confronting and as uncomfortable as it may be, the will of the Father is to show us that that we as the church are missing out on the Kingdom of God in our midst, that as the Church we are getting so caught up in the busyness of being the church that we have forgotten what it means to be the true authentic church in our communities. The will of the Father is to show us that we as the church have gotten so good at saying the right things, saying the popular things, just like the second son in the parable that we have lost our prophetic voice, our voice that speaks with the authority of grace, love, and peace, our voice people listen to and respond to because we are speaking as ones who are doing the will of the Father, as ones who have true Gospel authority because we are following the will of the Father, as ones who have something meaningful and life-changing to share.

Matthew tells us this parable so that we will remember that we have a calling to become true authentic people of the Gospel who live out the Good news

in our lives, that we have a calling to welcome all of God's children to the table, that we have a calling to remember that it is not just our words that matter but that as disciples of Christ, it is what we do that matters as well.

Matthew shares this jarring parable because Matthew understood what it meant to be the church here on earth. He grew up in the church. He understood the culture that surrounded the church. He knew that the church could do great things when it came to helping others. He had seen them! And he knew that deep down, the church was full of good hearted people who had had a life transforming experience with the divine and who were now trying to respond to that call the best way they knew how. Matthew knew what it meant to be the church here on earth. And he knew that as the church it was also easy to get comfortable in its ministry, to do the same programs year after year, to stay busy at the details of the church, to get so caught up in doing the work of the church that it was easy to forget why the church was doing the work in the first place.

Matthew wanted to wake up his community. He wanted to shake them out of their routines of simply going through the motions of being a disciple of Christ. He wanted them to remember that the work of the church is not to be comfortable but to comfort the children of God. The work of the church is to voice to the voiceless and to speak out against the status quo, when it means the status quo is that people are living in poverty, when the status quo means that people are going to bed

hungry every night, when the status quo means the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer, when the status quo means that people are living with wars outside their doors, when the status quo means that things will never change.

Matthew tells us this jarring parable to remind us that as people of faith, we should always speak with the authority of the Good news, speak with the authority that God is in control, speak with authority because as the church our words match our convictions and our actions. We are called as insiders, as ones who are supposed to get it, to remember that there is something transformative and life changing about God's grace and God's love. And that these things should never become just busyness or routine for us as disciples of Christ. These things, grace, love, peace and hope, should always be the work of the church. These things should always be what gives our voices authority, not because we are sharing powerful words, but because when we speak of these things, we are talking about the very nature of God.

This parable is our wake up call, just like it was to the church back then for us to wake up and realize that we can become so blind to what God is doing in our world around us because we as the church are so busy maintaining that we don't realize, that we don't experience, that we simply don't see that God is actively working in our world, that God is actively working in our community, that we see that God is just waiting for us to catch up!

As the church, we have fallen into the bad habit of not discerning God's call or maybe even ignoring God's call all together. As the church, we have fallen into the bad habit of going through the motions of faith and we have forgotten why we do the things we do as people of faith.

The good news for us this morning is that God is still speaking and is calling us to remember what it was like the first time our lives had been touched and changed by God's transforming love and grace. The good news for us this morning is that we are being given an opportunity to remember what it was like that first time God claimed us and named us as one of God's own. The good news for us this morning is that we are being given a wonderful blessing to remember why we came to church in the first place. It wasn't because we liked the building. It wasn't because the grape juice was good. It wasn't because the pews were comfortable. We came to church, we became a part of the Body of Christ because our lives were changed by the community that gathered there. Our lives were changed because we made a connection with the divine in that moment in time. We came to church because we realized what we do and what we say matter, not because we were suddenly given some special authority. No, we realized these things mattered because we realized that as people of God, as the church, as the Body of Christ here on earth, we were doing the will of the Father. We were speaking and living out the true authentic voice of grace, of love, of hope and of peace. We were

speaking as one with authority, as one who embodied the divine, as one who understood what it meant to be church here on earth.

The good news for us today is that no matter how uncomfortable it is or how hard it is, the will of the Father is for us to open our eyes to where God's active grace is already at work in the world and in our communities and to join in, regardless of where this call may take us. We are being given the opportunity to share the Good News that will never be routine or the same old same for all to hear. We are being given the opportunity to truly experience what it means to be authentic people of the Gospel message because as people of faith, we are called to love our neighbors through our actions and our words. We are called to preach the Gospel at all times, to reflect God's grace and God's love to all of God's children at all times, to welcome God's children to the table at all times. We are called to live as ones who recognize that all are made in the image of God.

May we always remember to be the Church here on earth, preaching the Gospel message at all times, and when necessary, use words. Amen.