

“What Do You Think?”
+ 16 Pentecost A +
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32
September 28, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The text for this morning’s message is the Gospel for this day.

For many years sociologists have done studies on why people attend certain churches. For many years it was felt that churches needed to be built around homogeneity – everyone should be basically alike in income, interests, race, color and creed. Lutheran immigrants from northern Europe had a corner on that kind of homogeneity for decades here in the U.S. None-the-less churches stopped growing that way. Next it was what kind of programs a church offered and their new, louder, better music – the bigger your menu at the cafeteria of Christianity the more people would show up and be a part of things – throw out the hymnals and bring in the band. Recently I was told that the next wave of the church is to move to small “unplugged” but tech smart start-ups in the hopes one or two will “take off” and move into whatever space they decide they want to inhabit – perhaps sharing said space with a variety of businesses that support their mission and help them build community.

Not to dismiss Sociologists two of my siblings majored in Sociology and minored in German (the other double majored in Hebrew and Philosophy – you’ll have to guess at mine). I would like to point out that the churches where I’ve always felt most at home are like Jehovah – an eclectic mixture of people of all backgrounds some who have always been here, others who are new, Christians gathered around Word and Sacrament with a variety of interests and connections that tie their lives together: shared history, friendship, music. The church has always been based on community – a community of love where no one is perfect but all have been found by God’s forgiveness to gather together around Word and Sacrament – to become an interdependent family of support and strength. That has always been my goal as a shepherd wherever I’ve served – in the classroom with young children or in a parish. It has always been my aim that we might grow together as a community of love welcoming to all.

That is not what we find in the Gospel where anger, envy and hypocrisy are hanging just beneath the surface of an apparently innocent and appropriate question, posed by the very church leaders of Judaism - the “chief priests and the elders” of the people, who ask Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?”

What things, you might ask? Well, today's Gospel comes way towards the end of Matthew's Gospel during the last days before the crucifixion. It is a tense time, Passover, where every year "messiah fever" took over as Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims hoping that this would be the year the messiah would reveal himself, raise an army from among them, and restore the kingdom of Israel to their glory days at the center of all the world kingdoms while the rotten Romans ran back to Italy, shamed and in shambles.

But that wasn't happening. What was happening was this: Jesus spent every day teaching in the Temple and then retreated to Bethany, the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, every night! Jesus had also just raised Lazarus from the dead, giving rise to messianic hopes among the people. As Isaiah had prophesied Jesus had made the blind to see, the lame to walk and healed the sick. He had also "claimed" the city by His grand entrance on a donkey in the raucous Palm Sunday parade where the multitudes proclaimed Him the "Son of David" who was coming to them "In the name of the Lord," words we sing rather casually in our hymns and liturgies, but back then were the rallying cry of rebellion.

And then, the biggie, the thing that prompted the "*by what authority and who gave it to you*" question. On Tuesday of that week Jesus entered the Temple and then emptied the Temple; tossing the tables of the money-changers and driving out the dove-sellers, because they had made His Father's house into a den of thieves. We're not talking rummage sales or bake sales but greedy people hiding behind God and God's reputation right there in the courts of God's Holy Temple all the while robbing God's pilgrim people blind.

And when the church leaders challenged Jesus He challenged them in return. Jesus backed them into a corner by asking the question about John the Baptizer, forcing them to choose between two equally damaging answers, so they muttered and mumbled among themselves until finally copping out with "We don't know."

All of that set the stage for the parable that followed—a simple little story about two sons, sent by their father to work in his vineyard. The first said "no" but later changed his mind and went to work. The second said "yes" but apparently found something better to do. And about all of that Jesus threw out the question, "**What Do You Think?**" and I think that's the question the Gospel wants us to wrestle with today. "Which of the two," He said, "did the will of his father?" And the answer is obvious---the one who

ultimately obeyed. On that point alone, you, I, and that menacing mob of religious know-it-alls must, should and would agree.

Then, like most of Jesus' stories, there's a catch, a hook, and the *bait on which we bite* is our arrogant self confidence that we're not like that First Son who said no but changed his mind. No, neither are we like the Second Son who said yes but changed his mind. As those listening that day no doubt thought we probably see ourselves as a "third son" the good and best daughter or son who always say "yes" to our Father's will and then set about to do as Father has asked.

"What Do You Think?" Isn't that the kind of godly people, godly people like you and me think we are? It's always easy to throw stones and, even from 2,000 years distance, manage to hit an easy target. Chief priests and elders of the people---the outwardly respectable ones, the ones who always did the right thing, at the right time, at the right place, role models of righteousness—they literally saw themselves at all times as the "third son," the good child, certainly that is how they presented themselves.

Then, according to Jesus the "good children" in front of him are told in no uncertain words, to their holy horror, no doubt, that others---those judged to be the dirt and filth of their society---tax collectors, prostitutes and outcast will be first in line entering into the kingdom of God. John the Baptist had warned them with his call to repentance but they hadn't listened – their hearts weren't softened and they didn't, wouldn't, couldn't allow themselves to see the truth that to really seek after God's will and God's way you must realize that you are always the first and second son – never perfect, never worthy but simply forgiven. You are always the equal of and never better than whomever stands next to you because we are, all of us, sinners in need of the Savior God sent – the Father whose great pleasure it is to give us the Kingdom.

For Jesus the "kingdom of God" was not limited to the "sweet by and by" up there and after death. It was always to be about the "here and now"— about God's work being done through you and me in God's Kingdom – done right here in this sin-sick world, this, God's vineyard. Through us is how the hungry are to be fed, the outcast welcomed, the prodigal brought back home, the homeless given shelter, and the wounded hearts and bodies healed.

Jesus is the door into the Kingdom – something hidden, in a way in the very last sentence of the Gospel, where we heard the phrase "change your mind."—a not bad translation, but the word is metanoia,

repent; it is stronger than just changing your mind. It is a change of heart – a heart washed and renewed with faith blown in borne on the wind of the Spirit that brings about a complete change of direction – one that turns us again and again as we return to the forgiveness granted by faith – turned again because we are not by nature and don't naturally behave like the “good child” – the third child joyfully doing our Father's will. We need to turn to the door of repentance and there find our loving, forgiving Father.

So, **“What Do You Think?”** Not about the parable or the people in it. We've gone beyond that because a parable holds up a mirror so we can truly see ourselves—not one another so we can judge each another because all of humanity in all hues and from all socio-economic levels are our homogeneous unit. **“What Do You Think?”** – How is God calling you to action in the Kingdom work before us here today – connecting to the people beside you in worship, those in your neighborhood, those with whom you work? Oh so many places to bring the gifts of the Kingdom. Even as repentant, redeemed and renewed children of God the task may seem daunting but remember – remember God's one and only Begotten Son, Jesus, who always said yes to His Father's will; who always did His Father's will; who came to seek and to save the least and the lowest is with you, with us as we work in the Kingdom, the Holy Spirit dwells within us to refresh and renew – at God's Table God is present to assure us of forgiveness and salvation as God's much loved daughters and sons. Amen