

“A Change of Heart”

Rev. Robert H. Wade

September 25, 2011

Matthew 21:23-32

There was a tough minded coach who had high expectations for his players. At the end of a particular practice the coach demanded that his players run three miles that night, do two hundred push ups and study the play book for an hour. All the starters shouted, *“you can count on us, coach. We’ll do it!”* That night, the starters all met at the captain’s home to run the three miles together. But before they ran they decided to turn the TV on and to watch the kick off of the NFL Monday Night Football. You guessed it, the Bengals were playing Pittsburg and they couldn’t resist watching what they knew would be an exciting game. They easily talked themselves out of running the three miles and settled in to watch the football game.

That same football practice, after the coach challenged his players to run three miles, do 200 push ups and study the play book for an hour, the third stringers whined, *“What do you mean, coach? We never get to play anyway. Why should we have to do all that work?”* Later that night, the third stringers met at the home of the water boy and they, also, flipped on the TV and started watching Monday Night Football. But the water boy spoke up and said, *“Let’s turn off the game and run the three miles and do our push ups.”* The third stringers had a change of heart, turned the TV off and went out to run three miles.

Which of the two groups did the will of the coach? The answer is pretty obvious! The third stringers, by their actions, said “yes.” Can you think of a time when you had a change of heart and your “no” became a “yes”? Can you think of a time when your “yes” became a “no”?

Much of Jesus’ ministry was focused on inviting a change of heart.....a new way of thinking...a new way of living! Jesus came to bring bountiful life. Sometimes Jesus went to extreme measures to make that point. Matthew tells us that, after parading into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus went directly to the temple where he turned over the tables of the money changers and shouted, *“My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.”* During the last week of Jesus’ life on earth the temple became the OK Corral of confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders. We see another confrontation in today’s gospel reading:

²³When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him. –*The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!*

Jesus masterfully dodges a rhetorical bullet by responding to a question with a question and then he tells the parable of two sons who are both asked by their father to go and work in the vineyard. The first son stubbornly says, "No way...fat chance....won't do it.....end of story." But, later, he has a change of heart and, indeed, goes to the field to work for his father. The second son is quick with a "Yes, certainly, father I will do exactly what you ask!" But, after giving lip service, the second son never gets around to giving foot service. Then Jesus asks an obvious question, "Which of the two sons did the will of his father?"

The religious people in Jesus' day got it right. They knew actions speak louder than words....they knew that righteousness is in the doing rather than the confessing....they knew that service trumps lip service! We, also, have no problem understanding the point Jesus is making in this story of the two sons.

Like this parable, many of Jesus' stories are zingers aimed at church people and, I have to admit, that makes me just a little nervous. I'm not really crazy about this story. It hits a little too close to home! I know what Jesus is saying. He's making the point that it is easy to come to church and sing our hymns, say our prayers, affirm our faith and look spiritual and religious and say, "yes" to God and God's righteousness. But then it just as easy to walk out the door and say "no" to God and God's righteousness with our actions!

I am especially uncomfortable when Jesus turns up the burners on us religious people by saying, ***"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."*** It was Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian theologian/writer, who once said, "Jesus wants followers not admirers." Followers follow with the actions of the one they are following. Admirers nod their heads and applaud their approval from a distance. I know it's much easier to be an admirer than a follower. I know it is much easier to give lip service to Jesus than actually love him and practice his demanding way of living. However, let's remember that Jesus loved the religious people of his day so much that he turned up the heat on them. He wanted them to have a change of heart. Jesus knows how cozy and comfortable we can become in our traditions, fellowship and beliefs. So he comes to us and says, ***"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."*** *That surely gives us a little pause to wonder?*

Like I said, parables like this make me just a little uncomfortable as I wonder about my own life and I wonder about what we are doing here at Fairmont. *Are our priorities in order according to God's will? Is what we do and how we live within these walls and outside these walls truly the way God desires for us to live? Do you ever ask yourself those kind of questions?*

Jesus drives the point home by reminding his listeners about John the Baptist. ***“For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”***

Right before their very eyes they had witnessed the way of righteousness through John the Baptist who called people to change their hearts and live in God’s righteousness. Jesus loved the religious people of his day so much that he deliberately sought to *agitate* them that they might break free from their cozy comfort.

One of the reasons we gather each Sunday is to present ourselves to God and allow Jesus the opportunity to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Sometimes we need comfort and sometimes we need to be afflicted. *Which do you need today?* The truth is that Jesus is here to meet us at our point of need.

We often think of Jesus solely in terms of comfort....the gentle Jesus who comes to us as the Great Shepherd to mend our hearts, bring healing and guide us through the valleys of life. All true! But let’s not ignore the Jesus who comes to us with the roar of the Lion of Judah. The Lion who gets in our faces to change our hearts when we are simply giving lip service to God. The subtle temptation in the church is to believe we have fulfilled God’s righteousness by coming to worship, saying our prayers and publically affirming our faith. There is no doubt that these are necessary for sustaining a strong faith. However, if our church experience isn’t motivating us to feed the hungry, befriend the friendless, listen with empathy, warmth and respect to our neighbor, visit the homebound, or seek to understand and reach out to the “least of these” we need to hear Jesus tell the story of two sons.

It was such a simple story. The father said to one son, *“Will you go and work in my vineyard today?”* The son said, *“Yes, no problem, I’ll get right on it.”* But he didn’t do it. So the father said to the second son, *“Will you go and work in my vineyard today?”* The son said, *“No way. I’ve got plans.”* But he had a change of heart and went and did what the father requested. *“Now which of the two sons did the will of the father?”* The answer was and *is still* so obvious.

Amen