

Two Sons
Matthew 21:23-32

“What do you think? A man had two sons.”

Dear friends in Christ,

What’s a father to do? Tom Benson had two sons. He needed the lawn mown. The lawn was such a mess and the Benson’s friends were soon coming over for dinner. So Tom asked his oldest son: “Billy, would you please mow the lawn for me? We have friends coming over for dinner within the hour and a mown lawn would make the place look a lot better.” The oldest son replied: “Yah, Dad. That won’t take me long. And besides, you give me the keys to the car; you put gas in the car; and my clothes are pretty nice.” The oldest son went outside just as his friends pulled up to the front curb, shouting, “Hey, it’s time to party. Let’s go to a movie,” and off they all went in a hot-looking car. Meanwhile, the lawn was looking tacky, so Tom said to the younger son. “Sammy, would you please mow the lawn right now? We have friends coming over for dinner.” And that younger son gave such an agonized howl, a whine that screeched your ears, “Ohhhhh, Dad. Do I haaaaave to?” He went outside, just as his friends pulled up with their bicycles, shouting, “Hey, let’s go. Girls down the street.” The younger son got onto his bike, thought for a minute, had a change of heart, and said, “I’ll catch up with you later,” and went and mowed the lawn. Now, which of the two did the will of their father. And the answer is so obvious.

We all have had these experiences, where the promises far exceed the performance, where people say “yes” too easily and then don’t follow through. And isn’t it aggravating when people say, “Yes, yes, we’ll do it!” and then don’t follow through. Like when the grandparents are coming over for dinner and the children are asked to pick up their rooms, and they nod a passive “yes,” and you, the parent, find them lounging in front of the television, playing the X-box. Doesn’t this just drive you up the wall? Or let’s say that you work in an office, and your co-worker next to you says, “Yes, I can get that work done tonight,” and you come into the office in the morning and it isn’t done. You can’t say anything, so you bite your lips and inside, shake your head in disgust and you do the work. It’s aggravating when people make promises but don’t follow through.

Since we all have had similar reactions and feelings, it is easy for us to understand the parable of Jesus for today about the two sons. The meaning is so obvious. That is, some religious people make all kinds of great promises to God but their performance doesn’t live up to their promises. These Christians promise God, “O yes, God, I will be your faithful disciple. I will carry out the mission of the church. I will do your work in the world. You can count on me, Lord. I’ll get the job done for you, Lord.” But they don’t do a darn thing. And so God goes and finds some less churchy people who actually go and do what God wants done in this world.

To understand this parable about the two sons, it helps to understand the context, the setting, which are the Bible verses before and after the story. This parable for today about the two sons is part of a larger section of the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus and the Pharisees are in conflict. In Matthew 21-24, Jesus and the Pharisees are in conflict with each other, and this parable is part of that conflict. In fact, Jesus had been in conflict with these Pharisees since the first days of his ministry three years before. For three years, Jesus had a running conflict with these people.

Now, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem. It was Palm Sunday and Jesus had entered the temple where he saw the money changer and merchants who sold pigeons and sheep. He had turned over the tables and declared that his Father's house was to be a house of prayer but they had made it a den of robbers. His action was a direct challenge to the chief priest and elders who were in charge of the temple. They took no action then, but they soon would confront Jesus and challenge his authority. Then Jesus left Jerusalem to spend the night in Bethany, perhaps at the home of Mary and Martha.

As Jesus was approaching the temple the next morning, he noticed a beautiful, green, well-shaped fig tree that was so lovely to behold; but upon closer inspection of this perfectly looking fig tree, it was obvious that there was no fruit. And so it was with the religious lives of the Pharisees; they looked so religious; their religious lives looked so alive, so green, so well-shaped, but upon closer inspection, they didn't produce any fruit. Jesus cursed the fig tree and it withered and died. It wasn't any good anyhow. That is, it didn't produce any fruit. And so it was with the Pharisees and the priests; they looked spiritually alive but they were really dead. Their hearts were dead inside and so were their actions of compassion for people around them. Those acts of compassion were non-existent in their lives.

Later, Jesus compared the Pharisees to cups that look pretty and clean and shiny on the outside, but inside, the cups are dirty, moldy, and corroded. And so it was with the hearts of the Pharisees: they looked good on the outside, when people were watching, but inside, their hearts were polluted and corrupted and stained.

So Jesus and the Pharisees were interlocked in conflict that Monday morning in the temple. "And when he entered the temple Jesus said to the Pharisees: There was a man who had two sons. He said to the first son, "Will you go and work in the vineyard today? The vineyard is a mess, and there is so much work to be done. Picking up the rocks. Planting. Pruning. Picking grapes. Producing wine. Will you do the work in the vineyard today?" In other words, will you care for the sick and dying, the blind and the lame, the deaf and the dumb? Will you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison?" And the older son said, "Of course, you can count on me." But then, the older son went off to the vineyard...where he enjoyed some wine and cheese and fellowship with his friends who also had come to the vineyard. The vineyard was still a mess and there was much work to be done; and so the father approached people from the lower rungs of society to see if they would do the work. He approached the tax collectors and the prostitutes and asked them the questions: "Will you do the work in my vineyard. It's a mess. The world is a mess. Would you care for the sick and dying, the blind and lame, the deaf and dumb? Would you feed the hungry? Clothe the naked? Visit those in jail?" And the tax collectors and prostitutes said: "Are you crazy? Who do you think we are? Some goodie-two-shoes? Get real." They started to walk away from the mess, but took a second look, had a change of heart, and went and did the work that needed to be done.

And Jesus looked the Pharisees in the eyes and asked the penetrating question: "And which of the two sons was faithful to the father's will?" And the answer was so obvious. Jesus continued: "And so the tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God before you Pharisees, even though you look so religious and smell so religious." Ouch. A zinger.

So what does this story have to do with you and me? This parable is an invitation from Christ to go and do God's work in the vineyard, in the messed up world in which we live. And living

like a Christian is work in this messed up world. There are so many hurting people to care for, so many sick and dying, blind and lame, deaf and dumb, so many without food, clothing and in prison. And it is work to live as a Christian in this kind of world. The vineyard, the world, is always in a mess. There are always earthquakes and tsunamis in the world. There are always wars in the world. There are always divorces and families falling apart. There are always poor families living down the street, with not enough money and emotional resources to make it.

So this parable is an invitation for us not to be like the Pharisees. It is a challenge to go into God's messed up world and do the necessary work. In Jesus' parables, the accent is always on the last figure, on the last personality of the story. That is where the focus is. In Jesus' parable, the focus is on the second set of people the tax collectors and prostitutes, who actually had a change of heart and went and did the work. You see, Jesus' problem was with the Pharisees who didn't think that they needed a change of heart; that they were just fine the way they were; that they were appropriately religious and they knew it.

And that's the way it has always been: in the Old Testament, the time of Christ and throughout all of church history. God's people have consistently been blind to our own need to have a change of heart about doing God's work in the messed up world around us. And so in this parable for today, Jesus is inviting you and me to have a change of heart...you and I need a change of heart...about the messed up world around us. You and I need a change of heart about the painful needs of hurting people around us...we need a change of heart about actually doing God's work of love in a messed up world. We all need this change of heart, a change inside.

One time, Jesus told a parable about two sons. It was such simple story. The father said to one son, "Would you go and work in my vineyard today?" and the son said, "Yes, yes" but didn't do it. So the father said to the second son, "Will you go and work in my vineyard today?" and the second son said "No, I've got other things going," but he had a change of heart and went and did what the father requested. "Now, which of the two did the will of the father?" Perhaps it was the third Son – the one who tells the story – the One who said "Yes, Father, I will go and redeem your people from their sins. Yes, I will suffer and die on that cross for their sakes". And then, no change of mind, but commitment so profound and a love so deep that He did all that His Father asked. Now, which of the sons did the will of the Father? And the answer was and still is so obvious. May He give us the strength to follow his example. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.