

Pentecost 16 – A (2014)  
Philippians 2:1-13  
Matthew 21:23-32

There are some dark clouds hanging over both of our Bible readings today. Earlier in this chapter of Matthew, we heard Jesus curse a fig tree for not bearing fruit when He was hungry. Not too long ago, in fact in the beginning of this chapter, Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey in triumph and, just yesterday in the biblical sequence, Jesus has turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple and released the sacrificial animals. This would have affected hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, and it would have effectively shut down the sacrificial operations of the temple for several hours, if not for the rest of that day. You can imagine that the Pharisees are not too happy with Jesus.

It seems from a reading of Paul's Letter to the Philippians that the congregation might have been having a bit of trouble. Paul doesn't tell us what the exact nature of the problem was. Maybe they were having trouble agreeing on the new carpet color for the sanctuary, or deciding what kind of worship style or music they should have, or what time they should meet. Maybe they were having trouble with kids riding their bikes unsupervised in the parking lot or neighbors mowing their lawns on Sunday morning during the worship hour. Who knows? All we can guess is that it probably was not anything big, as Paul's tone does not sound alarmed. Rather, he is very friendly and gentle, and since we know from some of Paul's other letters that he didn't have a problem dealing with trouble in a very straightforward and vigorous way when necessary, probably they were having a minor disagreement about something.

Even in the earliest church, little disagreements and individuals being unhappy about something were springing up here and there.

In today's passage, Paul tells the folks at Philippi that when they face troubled times, either from persecution from outside, or from disunity within, what they should do first and foremost is to put their minds and hearts to the task of being of the same mind, Spirit, and love that was in Jesus: "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had (3-5)."

Paul offers some very good advice to Christians on how they are to work through issues around which they are divided.

The key to his program is humility.

Christian humility, says Paul, is the way to unity both within the body of

Christ and in service and ministry to our neighbors.

In modern language, Paul tells us that instead of saying "Enough about you, let's talk about me!" our motto as Christians perhaps should read, "Enough about me, let's talk about YOU!"

Let's be clear, though. As easy as Paul's solution sounds, it is perhaps the most difficult challenge we in the church face. It may be difficult to remember to take Paul's advice and resolve differences over an issue by beginning the conversation from a position of humble listening. I'm sure there have been things, maybe things right now and probably - certainly -there will be things in the future of this congregation that will cause division among members or a community problem about which the church is divided. Is there a way we can use these words from Paul to suggest a path forward?

What Paul is saying here is that, with Christ as our common ground and with our shared desire to follow him, we who differ or disagree can still have a unity of spirit that makes us want to put others in the group first and look beyond our own interests. In fact, this unity of spirit is something that God bestows on us when we seek God together in the church.

We should note that in calling members of the Philippian congregation to be of one mind, Paul is not implying that the folks there were not already sincere in their faith and in their living of it. But he's calling for them to keep growing and maturing in the faith, to keep moving toward the example of Jesus, and to keep listening to where Jesus is still leading.

There are a number of parables from Jesus in the gospel of Matthew and today, Jesus gives us another one: the parable of the two sons. Jesus tells us a story about parenting.

Not surprisingly, Jesus, the single man with no children, gets it right. In today's text, Jesus tells a story which reveals the traits of our heavenly parent who has hopes and dreams for his earthly children, and yet at the same time, also displays compassion and understanding. Jesus describes the father whose expectations are clear. "Go work in the field," he says with authority.

The **first son** refuses outright, yet after reflection, thinks better of his rebellion and goes out to the vineyard. Despite his initial resistance, he obeys his father.

The **second son** is more devious. He puts on a good face and immediately agrees with his father's request; however, his actions do not measure up to his words. He ignores his father's wishes and never appears in the vineyard. Jesus asks the critical question, "Which of the two did the will of his father?"

What leads us to say "No" to God? What fuels our refusal of God? We might say no to God because we're *stubborn, afraid, doubtful, or we want to*

*do something else.* Given the choice -- labor in the field (volunteer at the food bank, visit a sick neighbor, work at a Brat Fry, serve on a Committee or Board, forgive someone who did you wrong, reconcile with someone estranged from you) or spend another hour in front of TV -- what would one choose?

Maybe the "No" grows out of a sense of being overworked? Could it be that the first son refuses his father because he believes he has already done enough for the father; perhaps he considers his contribution to the family to be extensive. Clearly the father thinks otherwise and is not prepared to offer his son an early retirement package. The father sees what the son is capable of and demands more. The son has a "Who me?" moment -- haven't I already done enough for this family? -- and yet evolves into an obedient servant.

Can God demand too much of us? It might seem like it sometimes. The temptation might be to say -- "No, let someone else do it. I've already given." "I've already done that job." "I'm too busy." Or, "that's too much to ask of me".

Jesus is always telling us to get our spiritual priorities straight - what's on the inside matters. We can't see the insides of people. We can't judge much about their hearts by their outward appearance, or even by their words, but we can get a glimpse of the state of their souls through the ways they behave.

We could ask the question, "When is a Christian not a Christian?" In his story about the two sons in today's text, Jesus makes clear who is obedient and who is not; who follows the real rules and who only pretends to.

The son who does the work, although he initially claims he won't, is obedient. The other son, the one who lies, telling his dad that he'll get the job done, but doesn't have the intention of doing so, is disobedient and defiant. His manners, of course, are impeccable.

In the end, it's not what the sons say that matters eternally. It's what they do. It's their behavior. "Just tell 'em what they want to hear, then do what you want" is the credo of the bad lad. This sweet-tongued son looks, at first, like a clean-cut kid. He's slick. He's quick. He talks a good game. But he's a bad, bad boy whose outsides hide his disobedience. He's not to be trusted. He lies to his dad, as if his dad isn't ever going to discover just what type of person this son is. As if his dad isn't going to see through his charade.

The Christian faith is a showy faith. It isn't a completely private religion, because Christianity is a DOING religion. Works matter, as the letter of James says. Faith matters, of course, but so do works. What we do, how we behave, matters.

Deceitful Christians may fool themselves into thinking they have fooled the world, but they can't fool God. We're all transparent before God. We hide nothing - not actions, not intentions.

Jesus, however, clearly has a forgiving heart and is able to see the bigger picture. It's not the first son's *words* that are important to Jesus, but his *actions*. Jesus allows room for complaining and verbal resistance. The first son, despite his original reluctance and outward show of rebellion, soon chooses obedience. He follows the will of his father and *does the work to which he is called*. The **second son**, however, only talks a good game. He promises much and produces nothing of value.

Jesus points out the difference in their actions to his listeners. The **first son**, like the tax collectors and the prostitutes (Jesus informs his listeners), is headed toward the kingdom. Despite the mistakes of the past, this son has now chosen the right route. The scheming, double-talking chief priests and elders, like the second son, are not kingdom bound. One cannot simply talk the talk of faith and obedience. *One must walk the walk, even when it means backtracking from a poorly chosen path, and starting over down the narrow path toward eternal life.*

There is hope for anyone who has ever pushed the snooze button on the alarm clock one too many times and missed an important appointment. There is good news for anyone who doubts their ability to make a difference and decides not to even try. The first son clears the path for naysayers and for hesitant, unsure wanna-be disciples alike. Here also is a challenge for any self-satisfied congregation or individual who assumes that their contribution and effort is enough.

For those who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, there is a message of welcome and an invitation to try again. Past blunders will not be counted against us when they are followed by both a change of heart and a change of course. Followers will not be judged on their initial, often impulsive mistakes, but rather on the final choices that lead them either closer or farther away from God. Jesus seems willing to look past the many weaknesses and failures in his followers and invites them to put their earlier bad choices behind them, so that they can follow him.

Jesus tells us to go into the fields and work. Paul tells us think of others before ourselves. It all about our attitude. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be humble and obedient: to do the work of forgiveness as we are forgiven and then to tell others of the amazing life-giving presence of God in our lives.