

Let Me Tell You a Story Sermon Series
The Disobedient Sons
Matt. 21:23-32
June 17, 2018

Do you know the game “Would You Rather?” It’s a fun game to play with youth groups or in any kind of ice-breaker situation. You ask question like, “Would you rather meet your celebrity crush or find a suitcase with a thousand dollars inside?” Then you let people answer. These questions are usually a lot of fun and a great way to get to know people. Personally, I would rather meet my celebrity crush who was holding a suitcase with a thousand dollars in it.

In our scripture reading today, Jesus decides to play a little “Would You Rather” with the Pharisees. You’d expect him to say something like, “Would you rather me still a storm or change your water into wine?” Instead, he asks them, “Would you rather have a child who was disobedient or a child who breaks promises?” Umm...someone forgot to tell Jesus this game was supposed to be fun.

He asks this question in response to the Pharisees challenging Jesus’ authority. He’s just entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and has gone to the temple to see what’s happening. He’s doing some teaching there when the Pharisees interrupt him and try to trap him with a question about authority. Jesus does some linguistic gymnastics to avoid the trap, then tells this deceptively tame parable.

A man has two sons. He says to one son, “Go and work in the vineyard.” The son refuses, but then later changes his mind and does the work. The man gives the same directive to the other son, who agrees to go, but doesn’t follow through. It’s oddly comforting to know that first century-parents had to deal with the same parenting challenges that we do. Jesus then asks, “Who did what the father wanted?” and the Pharisees respond that it was the one who eventually did the work.

There’s a lot to unpack in this short story. Jesus is setting up a difficult choice for the Pharisees: would a parent rather have a child who disobeys them or a child who dishonors them? I think I would choose to get a dog. Both of these were big cultural taboos during Jesus’ time. Children who didn’t do what their parents asked sent the message that the parents – especially the father – weren’t in charge of their own household, which would have been a brutal blow to their reputation in the community. No one wanted to have the child that everyone else talked about, the one who did the opposite of what the father asks.

But having a child who talked back was just as bad. After all, it’s in the 10 Commandments that children should honor their fathers and mothers. To say “no” to your father’s face was the epitome of not respecting your parents’ authority. So, which would you prefer? To have someone tell you “yes” and then not follow through, or to have someone tell you “no”? Would you rather be lied to or rejected? Can I choose, “None of the above?” Which would you prefer?

Maybe a better question today is, “Which would God prefer?” That’s really what Jesus is asking the Pharisees. In the end, who is most faithful: the one who says “no” but does it, or the one who says “yes” but doesn’t do it? Well, we know which one Jesus prefers, because we see it played out in Jesus’ parables. Jesus is pretty hard on the folks who say “yes” to God and then don’t follow through, like the parable where people RSVP for a wedding feast but then don’t show up and are condemned. But Jesus is surprising lenient on the people who say “no” and then change their mind. Think about the prodigal son, who initially rejects his father, but is welcomed

back with open arms when he repents. Jesus didn't seem to care much about dishonor but had a lot to say about those who were disobedient.

So, what does this mean for the original listeners? Jesus makes it pretty clear in his words after the parable. "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

The Pharisees initially said "yes" to God through their faith and work as religious leaders, but when Jesus comes, proclaiming a new way to believe and live out their faith, the Pharisees don't follow through. And the tax collectors and prostitutes, who live about as far away from God as possible, are the ones who are turning around and saying "yes" to the message Jesus is preaching. Which of the two is doing what the father wants? The ones who are now saying "yes," even if they started off saying "no." This means the tax collectors and prostitutes are more faithful than the Pharisees, the people on the outside of the church were acting more faithfully than the people on the inside.

But what does it mean for us? Who are we in this parable? Are we the kid who says "yes" and doesn't follow through, or the kid who says "no" but turns around? I would say we are both, aren't we? Which one I am depends on the day, my mood, how busy my schedule is, and the number of annoying people around me. I have told God a well-intentioned "yes" and not followed through, and I've told God point-blank "no," sometimes through my words but mostly through my actions. I want to be the person who says "yes" to God and then follows through. Isn't that who we are called to be?

When we baptize people here at Crestwood, we ask them to affirm a series of promises, to say "yes" to God. Those promises include things like, "Do you promise, with God's help, to do your best to renounce evil, resist temptation, and to turn to Jesus Christ?" and "Do you promise, trusting in God's grace, to be faithful in your worship, to be an active part of your church family, and to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others?" Of course, they always say "yes" or else they wouldn't get dunked. But will they always follow through on those promises? They say they will. But do they? Do you?

This parable provides both a word of warning and word of hope. The word of hope is for those of us who've said "no" to God. This parable says it's never too late to say "yes." Now, because you're sitting here, I'm gonna say this part of the parable doesn't apply to you. Sure, we have our days when we say "no" to God, but for the most part, we made that ultimate decision a long time ago. We may have friends or loved ones who are still saying "no" to God, so this parable can provide us some comfort. But I want to focus more on the word of warning this story gives us.

It's a warning to those who think they have it all together, that they have all the answers on who God has called them to be. That was the Pharisees. They just knew exactly what God thought, and when Jesus challenged that, rather than saying "yes" to this new way of believing, they clung tightly to their old ways. They were too personally invested in what they thought was right that they were unwilling to admit they were wrong.

We have to be careful about thinking we know the totality of who God is. Some folks today are just sure that God hates certain kinds of people, or that God sanctions certain kinds of treatment of other people. But God doesn't tend to be one who gets pinned down. Our faith should be flexible, always willing to incorporate new ways of understanding how God is at work and who God calls us to love.

Jesus warns against this when he says that there will be people who cry out “Lord, Lord,” claiming to know him, but who live lives that betray that relationship. I had a guy in my last church named Fred. Fred was a sweet, sweet man who was completely dependable. By that I mean I could depend on him every Sunday to all asleep within the first five minutes of my sermon. Every Sunday. And, every Sunday, good ol’ dependable Fred would come out of worship, shake my hand, and say, “Great sermon, preacher!” Fred knew the right thing to say, but his actions betrayed those words.

Our takeaway from this parable is to try and match our words with our actions. How well do we live out what we say? On Sundays, we ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. We promise to put God above the other temptations in our lives. We proclaim that everyone is welcome at the table. How well do our actions match those words? Are we saying “yes” here and then “no” out there?

It’s hard to keep our promises to God, because life gets in the way. So we can take solace in the fact that, even if our promises aren’t always good, God’s promises are. God is not in the business of breaking promises to us. In a world where broken promises pile up and clutter our lives, where people say “good sermon” after a good nap, there are some promises that we know we can stake our life on. Promises like, “I will not leave you as orphans,” and “This is my blood, shed for the forgiveness of your sins.” Promises like “I am with you, even unto the end of the age,” and “Where two or three are gathered, I am with them.” Through Jesus Christ, God has promised to love us and be with us. God promises to weep with us, to mourn with us, to endure pain with us, to rejoice with us. God promises to love each and every one of us as if there is only one person to love.

Ultimately, this parable balances its warning with the reminder that, whoever we are, we don’t have to be that person forever. There is always the opportunity to be a better Christian today than we were yesterday. God loves us for who we are, but God never wants us to stay there. As I heard Rev. Don Gillett say, “Your condition is NOT your conclusion!” Faith is a journey and each day is a new step, a new invitation to say “yes” to God and then follow through. The Pharisees had too much at stake, too much invested in their old ways of living and believing. It was too risky to think that God might be doing a new thing among them. So, they said “no.” What will you say?