



Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock, and my redeemer. **AMEN**

Last week when we talked about money, I mentioned that I used a program called Prepare/Enrich for couples getting married. It is a computer program with well over 100 questions that each couple answers separately. Then it is scored somehow by a program that was generated by marriage counselors and relationship therapists. After scoring I get a copy of where there are similarities and discrepancies in the answers between the couple.

As I recall, this is an example of the questions or statements and probably the one that is problematic for most couples. "My partner is the only one with whom I could have a meaningful marriage." Strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree. Almost sounds like a trick question, doesn't it? One of those that you recognize that you will be in trouble if you agree and trouble if you disagree. How on earth are we supposed to answer a question like that? How would you know if there is not another suitable mate in the world out of the 7 or 8 billion people you have not met. And so, if you disagree, because the possibility exists that there might be another person who would be just as well suited to be your mate, you are in trouble. Big trouble no matter what you respond. Trick question that does not seem to have a right or a wrong answer. But just maybe it can open the door to having a good conversation about qualities or characteristics that are important in a mate. So even though it is a trick question it can open the door for good relationship building to occur.

Well, our Gospel lesson for today appears to have several trick questions. In fact, I think that the Pharisees and Jesus are exchanging trick questions. The religious leaders want to know where or to whom Jesus gets his authority from. And Jesus resorts to answering a trick question with a trick question of his own. Not a lot of relationship-building going on here. In fact, both questions seem to get Jesus and the Pharisees backed into a corner. And we all can admit that no one likes that feeling.

So, Jesus takes another route and tells a parable. It is a story about a father and two sons that is only found in the Gospel of Matthew. I think the intention of this parable is to show two very different responses to God's call. Some question the meaning of the parable as they try to decide which is better, to talk the talk or walk the walk. And Jesus asks us to consider that as well, which of the two sons did his father's will? The Theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer called

talking the talk without walking the walk, “cheap grace”. But as we look at these two son’s reactions to their father’s request, I do not think it is quite as simple as that.

We have son #1, who said, “No” to his father’s request, but then changes his mind and goes to the field to work. Son #2 says, “Yes” and then does not go to the field at all. Both sons are guilty of violating my favorite commandment, #4, Honor your father and mother. Did one son sin more grievously than the other or are they both guilty of not honoring their father’s request?

If we find analogies in this story maybe it will help us to find the answer as to which son was most grievous against his father. Son #1 we can assume is like the tax collectors and prostitutes, notoriously sinful. Son #2 has the qualities of the religious leaders and Pharisees who followed their religious rules but did not love their neighbors. So, I ask, is it better to be a sinner or to be a Chief Priest? Or is there a difference in the eyes of God?

The religious zealots and priests were very good at adhering to the rules of what to eat, what to wear, and how to pray. On the outside they looked like religious people. However, when it came to showing kindness and compassion to those less fortunate, there was no concern shown. What they learned in their synagogue they did not live out in their daily lives.

On the other hand, the corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes lived outright lives of sin. They were all about not living by the laws and commandments of the Jewish people. But the one thing that they had, was the ability to change. When Jesus called them to follow his ways, they did just that. They followed Him and left behind their old ways. This to me is the important part of this comparison between son #1 and son #2.

Changing our ways to realign with the will of God shows obedience. Today that obedience is not any easier than it was 2000 years ago. The ways of the world just seem to suck us in before we know what has happened. We are tempted by alcohol, illegal drugs, illicit sex, and even pornography. Temptation exists for all of us. Lies, stealing, murder and coveting all lead to unsavory lives of sin. The devil is always there to coax us to go astray.

And thank God that He is patient with all his children and loves them all the same. God will never disown us due to our sin, just as this father did not disown either one of his sons. Jesus even mentions that both sons will still enter the Kingdom of God. We can well take note that no one is excluded from God’s love no matter how sinful they are.

Many theologians have mentioned that this parable is a great one as a mirror for us to look at. The use of parables is so we can see ourselves in the story, in other words. So, who in the story do you most relate too? Son #1 or Son #2? For me, it sometimes depends on what side of the bed I get up on in the morning and who I let guide my day, God, or the devil. I think we have to admit that we are both sons on different occasions. And we find both kinds of sinners in our church today as well.

With that thought we must remember that the church is not a country club or just a fellowship of believers. We cannot come to rely on softening our theology, using upbeat music, or listening to a comical sermon, to entertain us in worship. It is all too easy to expect to be entertained at “church”. This is why I think some of the big mega churches are struggling now. They find it

difficult to continue to entertain those who come to worship. But worship is not about being entertained.

To me worship is a time that we are strengthened in our faith in order to be sent out to teach, baptize and tell everyone of the good news of Jesus. Hearing God's word, singing His praises, praying, confessing and partaking in the Eucharist, are all part of our Sunday morning experience. I have mentioned before that a few of you told me on occasion that my sermon made you uncomfortable. God's word does convict us as we realize our shortcoming and sin.

And so, we come together to repent of our sins and receive God's forgiveness. Our faith is strengthened so we can go out as a new person to do the work of Jesus in the world. Obedience to do the will of God brings with it a new lifestyle where we have strength to shun the devil and walk in the footsteps of Jesus. True and faithful discipleship is our response to what God did for us as He sent his only Son to die on the cross a horrible death and was resurrected on the third day, so we could be assured of God's forgiveness, abundant and eternal life.

Jesus in this parable opens the door widely to tax collectors, prostitutes, and even us. The Good News is that God will never ignore sinners' sinful ways, but that they, knowing their sins, are candidates for repentance and salvation. The religious elite have a much more difficult time because they think they are holy enough to not sin or at least not admit their sin in front of the masses. But God will never stop loving them or let them go until they find the error in their ways. He continues to open to them the way of repentance through his constant love.

So, back to our parable question. Which of these sons is doing the will of God? Yes, it is a trick question because neither of them is. So, who did the father love more? Son #1 or son #2? This is not a trick question. I believe that he loved them both just as God loves all his children. His amazing grace changes everything. No matter where you are in life, you can change. Turn toward God, repent, and find the love of the Lord our souls yearn for. God wants all his children to live an abundant and fulfilling life on earth as we wait for our final gift of eternal life in heaven with Him. This is most certainly true. Thanks be to God. **AMEN**