

15 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21 – Year A – September 25, 2011
Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32
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Let's begin today with an oldie but a goodie. Change is inevitable – except from a vending machine! In tough times, it's tempting to want to treat God like a vending machine, perhaps trying to bargain or plead, or maybe just throwing a full out tantrum in an attempt to get what we think we want. There is so much stress around these days from every direction that the urge for us to resist change is almost overwhelming. Putting a lot of energy into maintaining the status quo in at least one aspect of our lives gives us a sense of control and stability. Certainly, it can make us feel better in anxious times to know that some things are unchanging. As we saw last week, it does our souls good to remember that we are the beloved, with whom God is well pleased. These are times to remember that in Christ, the foundation of our lives *is* rock solid, and our hope in Him is assured.

As we enter the world of Matthew's Gospel reading today, let's stay close to the assurance of God's promises in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Jesus' words from John's Gospel (14:1, 27), "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." This is good advice, because Matthew's Gospel continues to keep us on our toes this week as Jesus is challenged, and gives us all a fresh opportunity to consider our own response to Him, and to our own circumstances.

The situation is this. Jesus is in Jerusalem. The day before He showed up at the Temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, making quite a scene and challenging the authority of His own religious leaders. Today He's back, and the chief priests and elders are demanding to know "By what authority are you doing these things?" They fully expect Jesus to fall into their trap, and actually name some human mentor or teacher, or even better to say that He does what He does by God's authority. In the first case, they would be able to condemn Him based on their rightful lineage, and religious tradition. In the second case, they would condemn Jesus by witnessing to His blasphemy if He claims authority from God the Father. Jesus responds in the rabbinic tradition by asking a question of His own, in order to avoid the leaders' trap. It quickly becomes apparent that having a conversation with Jesus is dangerous. It still is. The Word of God is still "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword... it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). God's Word in Scripture and through our prayers still has the power to expose our intentions and the habits of our hearts, to reveal our secret agendas, and our fears. As He always does, Jesus, the Word of God still challenges us to live in the world in new ways through the transformation and renewal of our hearts and minds. The truth is that without our grounding in faith, change *is* very threatening and unsettling for us. It easily trips us up, knocks us flat on our faces, or unbalances us in many ways. It's like stepping into zero gravity, and feeling completely out of control. As Stephen R. Covey writes, we "can't live with change if there's not a changeless core inside" us. For you and me that changeless core is our faith, trust and hope in God's steadfast love through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus completely befuddles the leaders, whilst simultaneously exposing their worldly agenda to retain their own power and authority, their own status in society, as well as to continue collaborating with the Roman oppressors to keep the masses quietly in their place, and paying their taxes. Jesus also reveals their faithless acts of piety, and their unrighteousness, as well as the fact that the leaders are only paying lip service to God. Despite the witness of John the Baptist and his call to repentance; despite the presence of Jesus, God incarnate in their midst; the chief priests and elders remain stubbornly entrenched in the hardness of their hearts, and their only concern is to maintain the status quo. Before we explore the implications of the parable Jesus uses to illustrate the depth of His revelation, we too must consider whether there is anything in our own lives that dishonors God, and puts our selfish desires ahead of God's will. We are

invited to humbly examine our hearts and minds, so that we might repent our own resistance to welcoming Christ on the throne of our hearts, and at the center of our lives.

At the center of daily life for most of Jesus' contemporaries is family and work. He uses the example of a father and two sons, workers in the vineyard to highlight the point He is making to the religious leaders. However, in the timeless efficacy of God's Word, the story also has a challenge for us today as well. From our own experiences, most of us understand family dynamics pretty well. What we might miss here though is the implicit understanding of the original hearers concerning honor and shame, which is part of the way the world functioned in Jesus' day. As Jesus presents it, the story forces the audience, us, to make a choice, actually more of a value judgment as to which of the two sons was more obedient. Is it son number one who disrespects his father by mouthing off to him, and then later changes his mind and goes to work? Or is it son number two who says all the right things, but does nothing? Of course, given the choice, we immediately say that son number one is the better son because he eventually does do what he asked to do. In fact, both sons have behaved badly. Both sons have dishonored their father in one way or another. The first shames his father privately, by disrespecting his authority, and declining to go to work. The second shames his father by lying to him privately, and embarrassing him publicly by not showing up for work. This is what Paul speaks of in Romans (3:22-24) when he writes, "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

The gift of God's grace can only be operative in our lives if we accept it, as we accept the gift of faith. The last line of today's reading from Matthew is the real kicker. In faith, we have a grounding that helps us to deal appropriately with change. Without that grounding in Christ, change comes into our life like an unwelcome and threatening intruder. Jesus tells the leaders that even though the will of God was evident in the witness of John the Baptist, and by implication in Jesus Himself, and even after they see many believe in John, they still did not change their minds. The Greek word translated as "change your minds" also connotes, "changing what one cares about" or "to change what one is most concerned about." What do we really care about? Does our answer reveal a selfish agenda, or selfless love? Do we care more about keeping the blanket of our comfort zone securely in place, or living abundantly into our freedom in Christ? Is there something blocking our vision, our faith, or our trust in the Lord? Are we most concerned about keeping up appearances, saying what we think God and our neighbors want to hear, but doing nothing? Perhaps our biggest concern is to preserve the status quo and resist change, even when it is evidently God's will.

Just as the leaders did, we all choose one of the sons from the parable when Jesus poses the question. Implicitly Jesus points out that we all need forgiveness for our sins, and offers Himself again and again to religious leaders, prostitutes, and tax collectors alike. We choose one of the sons, but note that the father makes no such distinction. God wants to change all of our minds, so that we will only care to do His will, and be concerned with loving Him and our neighbors as ourselves. We are all God's beloved children. God wants our whole self, and our whole lives. He stops at nothing to help us find Him, return to Him, and rest in Him, even as we grow and change in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.