

When Our Words and Deeds Don't Match
September 25, 2011 Proper 21A
Matthew 21:23-32
Pastor Vern Christopherson

A friend calls to say hello. In the middle of the conversation, she switches gears: “Umm, I’ve got a question for you. How would you like to head up the pancake breakfast for the Boy Scouts?” You pause for moment, wondering how you’re going to respond. Are you more likely to say *yes* or *no*? And if it’s *yes*, why? Because you have a great passion for the Boy Scouts? Because you don’t want to disappoint a friend? And if it’s *no*, why? Because you’re already too busy? Because you’re not sure about taking on a leadership role? In the end it comes down to this: how open will you be to this choice?

Jesus has another parable for us this week. Like a number of Jesus’ parables, this one seems disarmingly simple. But—knowing Jesus like we do—we have to figure that if we dig a little deeper, we’ll probably find more than we expected.

A dad has two sons. He asks them to go work in his vineyard. One son really doesn’t want to go, so he mouths off, “No, I won’t go.” A while later the father looks up and, to his surprise, the boy is busy picking grapes in the vineyard. The other son, when asked to work, dutifully replies, “Sure, Dad, I’ll be happy to go.” But four hours later, he’s still on the couch playing video games.

Now, says Jesus, which son do you think pleases the father more: the one who says *no*, but then changes his mind? Or the one who says *yes*, but then doesn’t go? The answer seems obvious: it’s the one who changes his mind and goes. So—and here’s the real sting of the parable—what about that son who’s home playing video games?

What’s Jesus trying to tell us? On one level, I suppose, we could see this as a story about good intentions. There’s a part of us that wants to say *yes* and help with the pancake breakfast. But because of hectic schedules or a lack of priorities, we don’t get around to following through. Right now I know five or ten people who believe in protecting the environment, but they find it terribly hard to simplify their lives. I know twenty or thirty people who’d like to go to church more often, but they’ve never made it a priority. I know about a hundred parents who want to spend more time with their kids, but something always seems to get in the way.

With all these good intentions, we're like the son who said yes, but who never got around to going. Our deeds don't match our words.

On another level, I suppose, we could see this as a story about hypocrisy. That's always been the number one charge leveled against religious people. We profess one thing, but we do another. For the skeptics on the outside looking in, this just proves that we're not as high and holy as we think we are.

Generally hypocrisy is more egregious than failed intentions. We profess to love each other on Sunday, yet we say some of the most hurtful things on Monday. We promise to forgive each other, but we walk around carrying deep grudges. We pray for peace, but we find it so much easier to bicker and fight.

With this hypocrisy, again we're like the son who said *yes*, but who never got around to going. Our deeds don't match our words.

There's one more level to this story, I think. It's about more than failed intentions, more than hypocrisy. It's about not being open to the new thing God is up to in the world. The setting gives us a clue about this. The story takes place during Holy Week. The crowds have waved their palm branches and shouted *hosanna*. But not everyone joined the happy parade. The next day, when Jesus enters the temple, he's immediately accosted by the chief priest and elders. They have a sour look on their faces. They demand to know, "By what authority are you doing these things?" They're setting a trap for Jesus, hoping to catch him in a chargeable offence.

As you might imagine, there's incredible tension in the air. Picture a highly-charged political debate, only in this case, one side clearly wants the other side dead. *Who said you could do this, rabbi? Tell us!* Jesus refuses to take the bait. He's not in the business of proving his authority to anyone, but instead of simply inviting people to follow him.

Jesus responds with a question of his own: "Was John's baptism from heaven or was it of human origin?" Suddenly the religious leaders are tongue-tied. Political polls show that if they answer, "from heaven," they're going to take a hit for not believing in him. And if they answer, "of human origin," they'll get nailed for not regarding him as a prophet. They end up not saying much of anything, "We don't know."

Do you see the problem here? The high priests and elders have already made up their minds about Jesus. *He's not from God!* They refuse to even consider the possibility. They end up in a showdown with Jesus. It's political gridlock brought on by sheer closed-mindedness. They're like the son who says *yes*, but then doesn't go. Their deeds don't match their words. They claim to be obedient to God, but they're blind to the fact that authentic obedience includes responding in faith to the new thing God is up to in Jesus.

Jesus finishes his parable. He looks them square in the eye and says, "Tax collectors and prostitutes were at least open to John, and through John, to me. They will enter the kingdom of God ahead of you."

Someone once said that life is a series of choices. Whether it's heading up a Boy Scout breakfast or working to protect the environment or spending more time with our children, the choices we make end up defining us. For the chief priests and elders, the most important choice in the world was standing right in front of them. It came in the form of a person. Would they say *yes* or *no* to Jesus? Considering their closed-mindedness, it doesn't come as a big surprise that a few days later they put Jesus to death.

Now, this might sound rather strange, but a part of me feels sorry for them. How were they supposed to know that God was up to something new in Jesus? People are always making claims about God—wild and preposterous claims. In the name of God they move to Idaho, and build communes, and proclaim that the end is near. Then again, in the name of God people also start civil rights movements and stand up for the poor and extend an olive branch to the enemy. In a great big complicated world, we often struggle to see where God is at work. How can we know?

I wish I had an easy answer for you, but I don't. As we attempt to discern what God is up to in the world, it's important that we study the Bible and pray for guidance. And it's equally important—considering all the anger and divisiveness in our culture—that we do this in a spirit of humility. I mean, if we come to this search with our minds already set, we'll likely end up in much the same place as the chief priests and elders—all closed off to whatever new thing God might be doing.

I once taught a class on religion and politics. I was hoping to explore the connection between the two. I figured that most in the class would come with their

minds made up. I also figured that all sorts of contentious issues would arise and lots of strong opinions would be shared. To help in managing the process, I asked the class to try an experiment: when they finished sharing an opinion or a belief, they were to add the little phrase, “But I could be wrong.” So, for instance, *I believe thus and so...but I could be wrong. I think this it’s absolutely true...but I could be wrong.* It wasn’t the easiest thing to do, but everyone gave it a try. In the end, it totally transformed the spirit of the class. It made all of us just a little more humble...and open-minded.

Besides reading the Bible and humbly praying for guidance, there’s at least one more thing to help us discern what God is up to: the community of faith. The Bible is meant to be read and studied, not only on our own, but with other believers. We gather to learn from each other, and encourage each other, and wrestle with ideas together.

This is one of the main reasons for our 40 Day Adventure in October: to get into the word. On Sundays, we’re digging into the book of Ephesians. During the week, small groups will help us put Ephesians into practice. I see these small groups as living laboratories of faith. They help us with our choices in life, choices we face every day. Will we choose to be patient or impatient? Kind or unkind? Forgiving or resentful? They help us follow through on our good intentions and avoid hypocrisy, and better figure out what new thing God is up to in the world.

Let’s be honest, sometimes we’re going to be like that son who said *no*, but then changed his mind. And sometimes we’re going to be like that son who said *yes*, but then didn’t go. The choices we make will define us. In the midst of those choices is one more choice, the most important choice in the world: will we say *yes* or *no* to Jesus? Thankfully, that choice has already been made for us: God has reached out to us in Jesus and promised us to love us forever. God sends the Spirit to help us say *yes*.

When our words and deeds don’t match, God is patient with us and keeps giving us another chance. God uses the word and prayer and other believers to nudge in the direction we should go. And as our *no* becomes *yes*, our lives are transformed, and we follow Jesus along the way. Amen