

“A Change of Heart”

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First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 21:28-32

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 25:1-9

“Our society has moved to a point where both parents have to work to make ends meet,” observes Glen Morrison, chief operating officer of ParentWatch. ParentWatch is a company that installs cameras in day-care centers so parents can see their children throughout the day via computer or Smartphone. Promoting his service, Morrison asks, “Is what we offer a full substitute for time spent with your child. No,” he says. “But do you feel better about being separated from your child during the day? Absolutely!”¹

Whether you are a parent or not, grand-, great grand-, aunt or uncle, we can all relate to the desire of parents to keep an eye on their children and help them make the right choices. And children, both young and older, can relate to this, too, but in a different way. Because we’ve all had a mother or father or some other adult try to tell us what to do. How well does that go?!? Anybody? How well does it work when someone tries to tell you what to do? Not very well, right?

And that’s why Jesus’ Parable of the Two Sons is such a great teaching tool, for both parents and children and anybody who’s ever been one or the other – which I’m guessing is pretty much all of us.

Let me set the scene for you. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem after his years of ministry and miracles, and the Chief Priests and community leaders are questioning his authority. In verse 23, leading up to our reading for today, they ask Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Instead of answering their question, Jesus tells a parable. It’s a parable about a parent and his two children. “A man had two sons “says Jesus” he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” asks Jesus. “They said (correctly), ‘The first.’” Lesson learned – it’s better to change your mind and be right than to stubbornly continue in the wrong direction. Here, Jesus displays a degree of

¹ Evantheia Schibsted, “Parental Peekaboo,” Business 2.0, March 2000: 65.

courage and trust that would well serves all parents – and churches also, for that matter.

What parent, when his or her child comes back with the classic response “you’re not the boss of me,” what parent hasn’t said or at least thought, I brought you into this world and I ..., well you get the picture. But Jesus, rather than answering with threats, criticism or demands, Jesus realizes that people make their own decisions in life, and at some point you just have to let them choose.

With Jesus, it’s the choice to turn from our misguided ways, seeking guidance and wisdom through the Holy Spirit, and thus, being active participants in what God is creating and establishing, at this time, and in this place; in your life, with your family.

The joy of a parent whose child makes the right choice all on his own – that’s what it’s like for God – and more so – when we turn from what’s not working in our lives, and instead align ourselves with God’s divine plan and purpose.

We see this in Jesus’ parable, where he says to the Chief Priests, “Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

This isn’t just about Jesus and God and parent getting their own way. It’s about seeing what God is doing in our midst, and realigning our lives to God’s plan and purpose, as revealed through Jesus Christ.

We are all called to make Christlike choices, confident that God is with us amid the changes and transitions of life. This doesn’t mean we will always do things perfectly, but it does mean we have faith in God to show us the way forward at any twist or turn.

A little boy had been misbehaving and was sent to his room. After a while he came out and told his mother that he had thought it over and then said a prayer. Pleased, the mother said, “Fine. If you ask God to help you not misbehave, he will help you.” “Oh, I didn’t ask him to help me not misbehave,” said the boy. “I asked him to help you ... to put up with me.”

The good news for us is that when we catch ourselves falling short in life – misbehaving, if you will – God does not need any help putting up with us. Christ has taken care of that. It is in the grace and mercy of the Lord that we find the courage to change our ways, knowing that God has our best interest at heart, and would never lead us astray.

Now we could stop there for today, but let's take a moment to apply this teaching to a more specific context. At the beginning of this sermon, I said that Jesus displays a degree of courage and trust that would well serves parents and really people of all ages, but also churches – the courage and trust to realize that nobody is perfect and everyone deserves the chance to make changes for the better.

The PC(USA), which is our denomination as Presbyterians, is undergoing change these days. Churches across the nation are trying new things to connect with people in response to their busy lives and varied interests. Some things work well, and some things not so well.

And as a denomination, we can be applauded for trying out some new ways of doing church, while maintaining the core principles of our faith. I mean after all, one of the core principles of the Presbyterian Denomination is that we are a church that is reformed and always being reformed according to the word of God.

As Presbyterians, we should not let ourselves become too shake when it comes to making changes, even when that's not so easy to do, which it never is. So let's not get ourselves all worked up by this changing world we live in.

For as Jesus has shown us, it is good to be open to change, like the first son in his parable. It's good for us to be heading out into the vineyard with new energy and vision.

What do we see in God's vineyard these days – in the church and in the community, that is? What we see is a diversity of workers – a diversity of church and community leaders.

Among the workers in today's vineyard is a group of young people known as Millennials. The Millennial generation is made up of today's mid-teens to early 30-somethings. They are the children of the Baby Boomers and the Gen-X'ers. In this country, they vastly outnumber the boomers, coming in 80 million strong.

For any Millennials here with us today, please know that I value your sense of commitment. I know that you have a vision and desire for making this a better world. And I understand your skepticism when it comes to the role of the church. The church is not perfect. We don't have all the answers. But we do hope to at least be asking the right questions – that's another Presbyterian trait – as is mutual trust and respect and appreciation.

Just like parents must learn to trust their children, and children must learn to appreciate their parents, we today as the church need to embrace the same spirit of trust and appreciation – trusting the generation to come, and appreciating the generation that has gone before.

It's OK to make mistakes in life – as a child, as a parent, as a church, even as a Christian. Christ has that covered for us. In fact, there's only one mistake that can possibly get in our way.

And that's the mistake of not responding when God shows us a better way. That's the mistake of the Chief Priests, to whom Jesus says, "Even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe" So Let us all, in the days and weeks and even years to come, have the courage and the faith to follow wherever God might lead us – as a denomination, as a church, as adults young or older, as children ... of God. Amen

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious and loving God, one of the greatest gifts you have given us is the gift of free will. You have not forced yourself upon us; you have allowed us to choose whether or not we will surrender our will to yours and follow Jesus.

We know that this is a daily choice – to choose our own desires or yours? We have to ask ourselves, will we run after worldly pleasure, or the true joy of knowing Christ?

Give us hearts that want to choose you; hearts that desire your leading above all else. We are so thankful that you have called us to follow you, and today we choose to do your will. This is where true freedom is found.

We pray for those who struggle with this choice. We pray for those who struggle with life's circumstance, particularly those circumstances outside their control.

Help us this day and always to know and follow your will, O God, even as we follow your son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**