

Sermon Pentecost 18A
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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Matthew 21:23-32

When [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. “What do you think? A man had two sons; 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?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “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.”

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“Which of the two sons did the will of the father?” The one who went to work in the vineyard. This is a common theme in the Gospel readings from Matthew this fall. Last week, this week, next week, we hear parables about people working in vineyards.

I think it’s easy for us to assume what this metaphorical “work” means. Because it's really easy for us to look around here and see all the work that needs to get done. There’s all the work that goes into keeping up the Lord’s House. (Thanks to everyone who helped with the work day yesterday!) Then there’s the work of spreading the word, education and formation, feeding the hungry, showing mercy to the vulnerable, visiting the sick, caring for the grieving, not to mention advocating for the underserved and the unheard. With our robust protestant work ethic, we hardly need Jesus to explain what he means when his parables are about “working.” But he does. It can be hard to miss, especially when we’re so adept at filling in the blanks for him. But at least in the context of today’s parable, he says it. In fact, he says it three times in a row. There at the end. Can you spot it? Believe.

In this story, Jesus is talking to the religious insiders, the ones who (thank you very much) have been busy doing all the work all these years. They are the ones who take care of the temple, oversee faith formation, prepare for all the services, and make sure everything is done in accordance with the way it’s laid out in God’s Word. In today’s terms, Jesus is talking to church people. And he says to them: *My prophet came to you, and you did not believe. Now I come to you, and you still do not*

believe. The tax collectors and the prostitutes believe. But you are still resisting me. So when Jesus talks about who is out there doing the work? It's those who believe. This is the work of the kingdom: Faith.

The religious insiders did have faith. They had faith in themselves. They had faith in their own righteousness according to the law. They had faith in the sturdy boundaries they had set up to separate themselves from "sinners." But when God is among them, doing a new thing in their midst their words may say one thing, but their actions tell a different story. They may have faith in "the way we've always done things," but what Jesus is challenging them to believe is different.

He's challenging them to believe that when God promises to send the Messiah, that it's possible that he and his followers may not look like them. He's challenging them to believe that when God says he has made humankind in his image, he means ALL humankind bear the image of God. He's challenging them to believe that when God says his mercy is from everlasting to everlasting, that there are no strings attached... no conditions applied... no sector of society excluded... no sin, no doubt, no darkness that can come between us and God's love revealed in Christ Jesus. The will of the Father is faith And the work of his one and only Son is to show us the way. Like in last week's parable, Jesus comes to pull us off the sidelines and to get us into the game.

I love how Pastor Kris talked about the "work" in the vineyard. He said it's not unwelcome labor done begrudgingly. It's our purpose. It's our mission, to be undertaken joyfully and with thanksgiving for all that God has done for us. So in today's parable, when the father tells his sons to go into the vineyard, he's commissioning them in the family business he's welcoming them into their shared mission which is to bear good fruit. (It's no coincidence that the "work" these people seem to always doing is fruit-related. It's all about bearing fruit for the kingdom and the glory of God.)

What's the difference between the responses of the two sons to their father? One is all talk, and the other is action. One says the right things, but does nothing to back it up. The other one doesn't have the words, but he has the action. One talks the talk, But the other walks the walk. So when it comes to Jesus' call for us to bear good fruit for the kingdom, which one produces results? The one who does the work of faith.

It's as if Jesus is saying that faith, at its core, is not about what we say, but true faith shows itself in how we live. How we place our life in God's hands (not just talk about it) How we see God's image in ALL people (not just the people who look like us). How we give back to God what he has first given us joyfully, generously, not begrudgingly or out of compulsion. The work of the kingdom isn't just busy work, the work of the kingdom is first and foremost faith. And then the work of the kingdom is to lean into that faith so that it takes root in your life that it has the time it needs to establish itself in good soil to become deeper and stronger so it can flourish and grow to bear good fruit in the acts of trust, of mercy, and thanksgiving.

I recently learned a little bit about the way vineyards work. (Being from the Lowcountry, it's not something we see much around here.) When a new grape vine is planted, it does not grow fruit right away. In fact it cannot grow fruit right away. A new vine must be given time to establish itself, to send its roots down deep enough to become sturdy enough at its base before it has the strength to support the weight of the branches and the clusters of abundant fruit that it will bear. The vine must be given a full year or sometimes two to just be before it can be allowed to sprout fruit-yielding shoots.

So, for a while, the vine's job is simply to grow. It is a crucial stage in its life cycle that will allow it to mature and become a productive part of the vineyard for years and years to come.

Just think about that when it comes to the work of faith. When we hear God's call to "get to work," to have the kind of active faith that is the mark of spiritual maturity, take a moment to consider what stage your vine of faith might be in. Active faith for some might be more visible for some than for others. A robust prayer life, an unshakable trust in God, a zeal for the hands-on work of justice and peace for all people may not come right away if you are still in the deepening and strengthening phase. The kind of commitment you'd like to have to the harvest may not quite be accessible to you yet if you're in this phase, growing and pruning off those unhelpful shoots that threaten to uproot you and set you back. Some of us may be doing the kind of work that is not seen by anyone but God.

And let's be real with ourselves. We've all been through some things these past few years. There have been upheavals that have threatened our faith in humanity, our faith in institutions and, if we're honest, our faith in God. And even though we're here, sitting in the same old pews we may not find ourselves in the same place spiritually as we might have been in the past.

Today, some of us may be here to start over. And that's OK. In the meantime, God will be at work tilling the soil, and preparing a place for you to sprout and grow. You have a place in the vineyard. You have a role in the kingdom. No matter where you feel you might be in your progress, you're with us on the journey. You are taking steps to bear fruit with the kind of faith one that's not about talking the talk but learning, alongside all of us, to walk the walk.

Like Pastor Kris said, being a part of what's going on out in the field of God's harvest is not just a duty; it's a joy. It's our purpose as called, washed, empowered and commissioned Children of God. If it feels like just a duty, if it feels like just one more thing to add to your list, maybe that's a sign that it's time for some rest. Maybe your little vine of faith needs some time to just be nurtured and tended for a season.

The call of Jesus for us today is to actively engage. But we cannot confuse activity with the road to burnout. Jesus' call is not for us to just do for the sake of doing. Instead, the call is to deepen, nurturing our vital union with God through Christ. The call is to strengthen, to be fortified by the Word and sacraments. And when it is our season to bear fruit. to put our trust into action to let our belief blossom into witness and to follow our faith boldly out into mission field, we'll see God the patient and faithful gardener has been at work preparing and tending a place for us.