

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – A
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Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
1 October 2023

Ezekiel 18:25-28
Psalm 25
Philippians 2:1-11
(John 10:27) Matthew 21:28-32

John the Baptist: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand!”

As I mentioned last week, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told twenty-three parables—twelve about the Kingdom of Heaven.¹ He used a variety of images in these parables to make the truth about Heaven tangible for us; to make His ways and the mystery of Heaven easier for us to understand.² For the most part, these parables begin with the words: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...”³

We heard seven of the mostly shorter ones in the summer, from Chapter 13, which used memorable images (e.g., mustard seed, yeast, etc.) to help deepen our understanding that the desire for the Kingdom of Heaven is placed inside each human soul. We’re all made with a desire for God, and we’re meant to live in this world in a way that will nurture and make that desire for God take root, grow, flourish, and bear good fruit in our lives—which helps us begin to experience the Kingdom of Heaven now, and look forward to experiencing its fullness when Jesus calls us and comes to take us there Himself.⁴

This fall, in the latter chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, we hear the five remaining Kingdom parables. These are longer parables, and they reveal ways that Kingdom of Heaven is about how we relate to one another. The past two weeks: *The Unforgiving Servant*⁵ and *The Workers in the Vineyard*.⁶ Lessons learned: the Kingdom of Heaven has something important to do with persevering in forgiveness and mercy (not seven times, but seventy-seven times!⁷), as well as rejecting the deadly and diabolical sin of envy.⁸ Envy clouds our vision, making us believe that we’ve been denied something or are owed something more, and thus prevents us

from rejoicing in our own successes, as well as those of others, and from being grateful for what we've all been given from God's generosity.

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Today is another parable, but it's *not* one of the twelve that reveal to us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Instead, *The Parable of the Two Sons* reveals to us what the *Way* to the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

On first reading, the moral of this parable is fairly straightforward and, even though many times people don't understand the parables when they hear them from Jesus, the chief priests and elders are able to answer Jesus: Which of the sons who did his father's will? Well, the one who *actually* did it.⁹ *Not* the one who didn't do it. We can disregard which son said what, and skip to the actions. The first son is clearly the one who did his father's will.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to have integrity in doing our Heavenly Father's will. Our words matter, and they are important—but only if our words are also followed up with our actions.

It seems that we may have arrived at the point for today's parable, and could perhaps end the homily right here (which some of you might appreciate!). However, do we really think that Jesus came all the way from Heaven to simply tell us to have integrity with our words and actions? Let's stay with it; let's take a deeper dive and see if there's more to this parable.

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Let's start by looking at the setting and context of today's Gospel: *Where is Jesus? Whom is He talking to? Whom is He talking about?* Let's review the verses that immediately precede today's Gospel.¹⁰ Jesus is in the Temple area, and as He is teaching, the chief priests and elders approached and asked Him, "...who gave you this authority?" In response, Jesus

asked *them* a question: “Where was John [the Baptist]’s baptism from? Was it of heavenly or of human origin.”

This question made the chief priest and elders feel stuck. If they said “heavenly,” then they would be embarrassed, because they did not believe what John preached. However, if they said “human,” then they would look bad in the eyes of the crowd, because the people held John as a prophet. Their solution was to be evasive. To not take a risk either way, saying, “We do not know.” Because they refused to respond, Jesus said to them, “Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

So we notice not only where Jesus is and whom He is talking to, but also that He is talking *about* John the Baptist. And, if we check the end of today’s Gospel, after the parable, we notice that He is once again talking about John the Baptist. Jesus’ reference to John—as you might be able to surmise—is not coincidental or accidental or random. We can see that there’s sort of an *inclusio* going on here. An *inclusio* is a literary device in which similar material is placed at the beginning and the end of a section of work. It’s meant to draw attention to the content that is “included” in the middle, but in this case also draws attention to the beginning and end. We can see that there’s some type of relationship being demonstrated between *The Parable of the Two Sons*, John the Baptist’s preaching, and the chief priests and elders.

This parable applies to the chief priests and elders. On the one hand, they are just like the first son, saying “I will not” and refusing to believe in John’s preaching. On the other hand, they are *not* like the first son, in that, after seeing all the conversions and good fruits of John’s preaching, “[they] did not later change [their] minds and believe him.”¹¹ Therefore, as they were stuck in their inability to answer Jesus’ question, they reveal that they are also stuck in their

ability to see their need for a Savior. Their need for repentance. Their need to turn back to the Father and begin making their way to the Kingdom of Heaven.¹²

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How does this parable apply to us? As we recognized at our first reading of the parable, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are, we are called to have integrity. Our words matter, and they are important—but only if our words are also followed up with our actions. However, Jesus didn't come all the way from Heaven to simply tell us to have integrity with our words and actions. Jesus came to save us. Jesus came to set us free from slavery to sin. Jesus came to do His Father's will.¹³ And Jesus came to show us the Way to the Kingdom of Heaven.¹⁴

Being a person of his or her word is an important part of being a good and moral human being. But, being a good and moral human being is in itself not enough for salvation. It's a very good start, but it's not enough for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Today's parable applies to us, because all of us are the first son, in that we've all been disobedient and refused to do our Father's will. The key to applying today's Gospel is for us to also follow the first son's example of changing our minds and our hearts.

And John the Baptist is the key for us to arrive at a deeper understanding of this parable. Jesus' references to John before and after the parable are not accidental. *What did John the Baptist preach?* He preached about the Lamb of God: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."¹⁵ He preached about repentance: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"¹⁶

Repentance is the key and the heart of today's parable. Repentance is changing our minds and hearts, turning back to God, and resolving to doing the Father's will. The chief priests and the elders felt stuck because they refused to repent. They refused to see their need to repent.

They refused to change their mind and heart. They refused to take a risk of faith and obedience and trust in the Lord's mercy.

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Today's parable is not about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, but it's certainly about how to get there. The only way to the Kingdom of Heaven is what John the Baptist preached. Recognizing that I'm a sinner, who's in some way refused to obey my Heavenly Father. When I'm faced with that truth—not in shame or condemnation, but in full hope and trust in God's mercy—then I can also do what the first son did in today's parable.

I can repent. I can change my mind and heart. I can turn back to God who is not only waiting for me, but is chasing after me.¹⁷ I can go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I can hear that my sins are forgiven. And I can have certitude that I am doing the Father's will—that the Lord is helping me get better at doing His will—and that I am on the Way to Heaven.

¹ See Matthew 13:1-53; 18:23-35; 20:1-16; 22:2-14; 25:1-30

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 2*, 54:

“The parable always *makes truth concrete*. There are very few people who can grasp and understand abstract ideas; most people think in pictures. ...and the first great quality of a parable is that it makes truth into a picture which all men can see and understand.”

³ E.g., Matthew 20:1, etc.

⁴ John 14:3

⁵ 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A: Matthew 18:21-35

⁶ 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A: Matthew 20:1-16

⁷ Matthew 18:22

⁸ CCC 2539

⁹ Matthew 21:31

¹⁰ Matthew 21:23-27

¹¹ Matthew 21:32

¹² See Adrien Nocent, “Twenty-Sixth Sunday: Repent and Live: *Sinners Are Saved by Faith and Repentance* (Matt 21:28-32) in *The Liturgical Year: Volume Three: Sundays Two to Thirty-Four in Ordinary Time* (2013), tr. by Mathew J. O’Connell, 147-148

¹³ Philippians 2:8; John 5:19-30, 6:38

¹⁴ John 14:6

¹⁵ John 1:29

¹⁶ Matthew 3:2

¹⁷ Psalm 23:6; Luke 15:4-7