

Lost and Found

Mt. 21:23-31

Rev. Ginger Cunningham

The story in today's Gospel challenges us to understand and accept two simple truths: a truth about ourselves, and a truth about God.

In this story, two sons have an opportunity to serve their father in his vineyard. One agrees readily to do this work, but doesn't get around to it. The other says, "No thanks..." and rejects the offer. But he changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard after all.

The son who acts agreeable and cooperative is, in reality, a louse. He has no commitment, he has no follow-through. Although he seems good at saying the right thing, he's simply a "yes" man. Anxious to agree, eager to say whatever his father wants to hear.

Then there's the son who says, "No." He appears to be a lazy good-for-nothing. What's going on when he rejects his father's offer to work in the vineyard? We don't know. Whatever it is, though, we can tell that work in the vineyard holds no appeal for this young man.

The hinge on which this parable turns is not merely words. The truth about ourselves is found in action or the lack of action.

The son who says, "Yes, I'll go," is struck by a major case of sloth, or worse. (Maybe he was even lying when he said "Yes...")

Conversely, the son we think of as lazy, the one who says, "Nope!" goes, later, to work in the vineyard. This son had a change of heart, and his later actions show that he really did honor his father's request.

Here is another story. Maybe you've heard it before.

In the mid-18th century, there was a young Englishman who had grown up in difficult circumstances. His mother died when he was young, he was a poor student. His father worried about him and finally got his son a job at sea. The boy was later impressed into the Royal Navy, he tried to run away, and was flogged. He had turned into a pretty bad character.

After his stint in the Navy, he became captain of a slave ship. He was only 23 years old but he was tough. He lived life "on the edge," was well-known for his rough language and his brutal treatment of his human cargo.

After years of successful trips, during which he earned a great deal of money, his ship ran into rough weather. In fact, it was such a bad storm the crew and the captain thought all was lost. At the height of the crisis, the captain looked around. He thought of the money he would forfeit if the ship went down. He knew that, in all probability, he would die.

Uncharacteristically, he said to the crew, "Well, if nothing can be done, Lord have mercy upon us." Then he went to his cabin, assuming the end was near.

Do you know what happened?

Well, the ship wasn't lost at sea. And the captain didn't lose his life. At least, not in actuality. But something did change for him after the night that as he stood on the deck and called upon God's mercy. The captain's name was John Newton. He subsequently gave up slave-trading. He studied to be a priest in the Church of England. After his ordination, while serving in his first parish, in Olney, Buckinghamshire, he started writing hymns.

A few years later, in 1778, John Newton wrote these words in his journal:

"How industriously is Satan served. I was formerly one of his active under-temptors and had my influence been equal to my wishes, I would have carried all the human race with me. A common drunkard or profligate is a petty sinner to what I was. I had the ambition of a Caesar or an Alexander. I wanted to rank in wickedness among the foremost of the human race. Oh, to grace how great a debtor!"

John Newton was the author of one of our church's best-loved hymns "Amazing Grace." He wrote out of his own experience, knowing that he'd once said, "No," to God. That he'd been lost — but that that God had, indeed, found and brought him home.

The basic truth about human behavior which today's Gospel underscores is this: we are notoriously good at nodding our heads, agreeing with God, saying "Yes," to things and then falling down on the job.

We're also very adept at ignoring what God wants us to do. Too frequently, we're really good at saying, "No" to God, just like the son in the parable. Just like John Newton, during his years as a slave trader.

Jesus knew this truth about human behavior, which is one reason he told the parable of the two sons. He wanted to be sure that we understand: it's not just what we say that counts. Action, follow-through, behavior is what matters.

Saying "Yes," without doing anything about it is the opposite of God's call for us. Saying, "No," to God can be a rejection of God's call — but, often, it's only a temporary rejection. Like John Newton, we've all been there. We've all, at one time or another, said "No," to God, done things we know are misguided or just plain wrong. Or we've said, "Yes!" (hoping to sound correct and agreeable) and then we've done nothing. I started out by saying there are two truths in today's Gospel. Each of us knows well the truth about human behavior — because we struggle with it every day.

The second truth, the truth about God in today's Gospel story, is this: God loves us unconditionally. God loves us so much that God gives us free will. God has graced us with an ability to know our own strengths and weaknesses. And God has given us the freedom to call upon either strength or weakness. God leaves the choice to us.

The parent in the Gospel story was poorly served by the child who said, obediently, "Yes," and then did nothing. The vineyard did not benefit from well-intentioned, but ineffectual, words of agreement.

The parent in the Gospel story was more faithfully honored by the child who at first said, "No," but then changed his mind.

God was faithfully honored by John Newton — a real good-for-nothing — a mean-spirited man, driven by the thought of earning money through trade in human lives. Yet John Newton was a man who changed his life and thereafter devoted himself faithfully to serving God and God's vineyard.

God isn't looking for "Yes" men or "Yes" women who say the "right" thing but never get around to doing it.

God is looking for people like you and me. Real people. Ordinary people. People who have the courage, honesty, and humility to admit they've messed up with the free will thing. God is looking for people who have said "No,"

God wants us to reconsider, to turn our lives around. And God gives us a promise: God is always there, waiting for us, whenever we decide we're ready to be found.

###

Let us pray...

Dear God, we know that "through many dangers, toils and snares, we have already come." Help us, please, to know that it's your "grace that brought us safe thus far." And help us, please, to remember — no matter how far we stray or how many times we say "No!" — that your "grace will lead us home."

Amen.