

Twenty-sixth Sunday – Ordinary (A)

That first reading is so appropriate for today isn't it? The people say, "The Lord's not fair!" But Ezekiel comes right back saying, "Wait a minute – is it God's conduct that's not fair... or yours?" God made all things good, honorable, and untainted. But, we're the ones who don't listen and then hurt, agony, and cruelty follow because we don't love. Just the same, the prophet says that if a person turns from their mischief; that they'll live. The point being – we each need to take individual responsibility for our actions, and accept that a lot of time we bring on our own misery.

That second reading contains that beautiful hymn in Philippians, "Though he was in the form of God – Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at – rather he humbled himself." But the verse right before this hymn is key, "Do nothing out of selfishness or vanity. Instead, with humility, regard others as more important than you!"

Then, we hear this parable and what we hear isn't really that challenging – in fact, it's pretty straight forward. Dad asks the boys to do something. The first son sounds defiant, but in fact does what his father asks. The second son does just the opposite; he sounds obedient but doesn't follow through. Jesus' message is, "You Jewish leaders said you would obey God and then didn't. But, the tax collectors and prostitutes said they wouldn't follow God and then did.

To put this in context, the leaders had just tried to embarrass and discredit Jesus publically by challenging his authority. Their anger toward Jesus is escalating and they're irate because Jesus just rode into Jerusalem to crowds singing Hosanna.

So Jesus uses a technique similar to what Nathan did when he confronted King David about his immoral behavior with Bathsheba. Bathsheba was the wife of David's general. David had the general sent to the front lines and he was killed. Nathan tells David a story about a rich man who took the only possession of a poor man - a precious lamb. Then Nathan invited David to pronounce judgement in the case. And, as David condemned the rich man... he in fact condemned himself.

So here, Jesus' had just asked the Jewish leaders whether the baptism of John was from heaven or humankind. And, they debated among themselves because they knew that either answer had a bad outcome for them... so they finally said, "We don't know."

That was the set-up. Then, Jesus tells this parable about a father and two sons - which is very familiar theme in Jewish ancestral stories like; Cain and Able, Jacob and Esau, the prodigal son and the older brother. In each of these stories, the brothers represent contradicting words and actions.

So, even though the leaders wouldn't answer the question about John the Baptist, they were caught off guard and answered this one saying that the first son did the father's will. And, by their answer, they unknowingly condemn themselves. The story was designed to shock the religious leaders into a change of heart by saying, "tax collectors and prostitutes are entering heaven before you."

However, in today's context the key to understanding this story is to know that it's not flattering to anyone. It paints a picture of two very imperfect sets of people - one of which was nonetheless, better than the other. Neither of the sons was the pride and joy of his father.

Both were disappointing; but the one who in the end obeyed, was considerably better than the other. The "ideal" son would be the one who accepted his father's direction with obedience and respect and then – completely and without question carried them out. The truths in this parable go far beyond the situation.

We learn that there are two very common types of people in the world. There are those whose promises are much better than their practice. They will promise anything; they make great pronouncements of piety and fidelity; but their action lags far behind. Next, there are those whose actions are far better than their promises. They claim to be tough and act mean and hard-headed but somehow they are found doing caring and generous things, almost in secret. They live more Christian lives than most.

The real point of the parable is that while the second group is infinitely preferred to the first, neither close to perfect. The really good person is the one whose words meet and match their action.

The story also teaches that promises can never take the place of performance, and words are never a good substitute for loving action.

The son who said he'd go but didn't, had all the outward signs of courtesy. He even respectfully called his father "sir." But a courtesy that never goes beyond words is an illusion. Real courtesy is obedience that's willingly and graciously given.

On the other hand, we learn that a good thing can easily be spoiled by the way it's done. A fine thing done without kindness and generosity can spoil the whole thing.

So what can we do? Well... let's try, each day this week, to respond to someone; your spouse, or children, brother/sister, co-worker, or friend with a constructive answer to something they ask you to do. Then follow-through and do it - without griping or complaining... but with kindness.

The messages today are that we are to:

- Take individual responsibility for our actions
- Not act out of selfishness or vanity but, in humility regarding others as more important than us
- And, in all things – work to have our words and actions be one in the same; done in kindness and with courtesy.