

Last Sunday's Gospel was the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16. For today, we skip the rest of the twentieth chapter of Matthew, and the first 27 verses of chapter 21. And we never come back to this section completely. We get part of it on the Feast of St. James on July 25 every year when the Gospel reading is Matthew 20:20-28.

And so we have to backtrack a little and fill in some blanks in order to make sense of what Jesus is saying in this parable of the two sons. In chapters 19 and 20 Jesus is making his way toward Jerusalem, stopping in places like Galilee and the region of Judah beyond the Jordan, teaching in parables along the way. At the beginning of chapter 21, Jesus makes what has become known as his "triumphal entry into Jerusalem" that we celebrate on Palm Sunday.

Jesus has now entered Jerusalem for the last time. The time for him to go to the cross is only days away at this point. In Matthew 21 Jesus chases away the vendors and money changers from the Temple, curses the fig tree and then goes back and teaches in the temple. It's at this point that the chief priests and the elders come to him wanting to know by what authority he is doing all these things. Before he will answer their question, he asks them if the baptism of John was of heavenly or earthly origin. He's cornered them. If they answer heavenly, they know Jesus will want to know why they didn't believe John then. On the other hand, if they say "earthly" they'll have to answer to the crowds, who take John to be a prophet. So they claim ignorance. And in response, Jesus denies answering their question.

So this is the context in which Jesus tells this parable of the two sons. His purpose is to expose the chief priests and elders' faithlessness.

Now for years and years I never understood this parable. I thought that when Jesus tells the chief priests and elders that the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of them, he meant that their answer was wrong. They weren't wrong – the first son did the will of his father. And that's what the chief priests and elders said. It's what I always thought. It's obvious. The second son didn't do anything. Jesus' admonition of the chief priests and elders points out to them, or at least is intended to point out to them, the irony of their position. They are able to discern which of the two sons did the will of the father, but they cannot see how they are just like the second son. John came preaching repentance. The tax collectors and prostitutes shunned his message – at first. Then they finally came around and accepted it. The chief priests and the elders were very welcoming to John and his message, but ended up ignoring it. Especially reprehensible in Jesus' estimation is the fact that even after the chief priests and elders saw how the tax collectors and prostitutes had a change of heart and eventually came to repentance, they *still* failed to come to repentance themselves.

Jesus meant for the chief priests and the elders to see that in the parable the father represents God, and the first son represents those who may have at first rejected the Gospel, but later came to repentance, and that the second son, who did nothing, represents them.

And by extension, we are to see in this parable which of the two sons we are. The question for us is whether *we* are doing the will of God the Father.

One of the things I find most intriguing about the Gospel is that many times, one short passage conveys either the entire Gospel message, or at least one essential point of it. John 3:16, for example, captures in one sentence the fullness of the Gospel message. In the parable of the two sons, we are addressing the subjects of doing the will of God and entering into God's kingdom. And actually those two condense into one. Doing the will of God amounts to being in God's kingdom.

This isn't the first time Jesus has brought this up. In chapter 7 he says "Not every one who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven." In fact, this saying fits neatly with the parable of the two sons. The first son was rebellious at first, but then did the will of his father. The second son, was agreeable and polite, calling his father "Sir". Being nice and using the proper, formal titles, but not repenting, is not how one enters the kingdom of heaven. Doing the will of the Father *is*.

Now this might raise some tensions for us. You might hear preachers or theologians talk about how the Christian faith is not a set of rules that we must follow. They might say that we're not on a performance basis here in this life. We're incapable of fulfilling the Law, which is why Jesus came in the first place. He came to fulfill the Law for us. He was the only one who

could. We can't follow a list of do's and don'ts and then expect to present this performance to God as proof of our fitness for heaven.

And yet Jesus returns to the topic of doing the will of the Father. In that verse from chapter 7, it seems clear that our entrance into the kingdom of Heaven is dependent upon our doing the will of the Father. What is the will of the Father? How do we know if we're doing it? How can we do it?

The subject of the divine will is enormous. We can get very philosophical about it: Is everything that happens the will of God? Are there distinctions within the will of God? You may hear of a priest or a theologian speak of the "permissive will of God" or the "perfect will of God".

To put it succinctly, for our purposes here today, for our everyday lives, the will of God means God's purposes and designs for all of creation and especially for humanity. God meant for creation to be at least several things. He meant for creation to reflect His glory. And God meant for humanity to know Him, and to enjoy fellowship with Him for ever. This is what God *wills*.

Now, all sorts of things happen every day that are not in accord with this will of God's. Things happen that reflect anything but the glory of God. Far too many people do not know God and do not enjoy fellowship with him.

When we are "doing" the will of God, our whole lives are ordered to the ends of reflecting His glory in the world and enjoying fellowship with Him. The first step we can take in so ordering our lives is to come to repentance. This is John was talking about. Some people seemed like they

weren't going to listen, but then they did. Others said they would listen, but never did. This is what Jesus is talking about.

There are some people today who have an image of Jesus that just doesn't fit with how he is portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew, especially in these scenes in chapter 21. They see Jesus as more of a Haight-Ashbury flower child type who went around in his robes and his long hair and beard, ate granola and said things like "all you need is love and peace, brothers and sisters".

It's as if they haven't read the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus says things like, "don't think I've come to bring peace to the earth – I've come not to bring peace, but a sword." Jesus was very confrontational. We skipped over the scene where he entered the temple and threw out the money changers and the vendors. He was angry. And in this parable he is directly confronting the religious leadership. He does not mince words. He's dead serious. He has to be.

But notice that Jesus does confront these people who have not come to repentance. That's mercy. He could have let them go their way. But God's will is that none should perish.

Jesus gets tough here. Few people would want to be compared to tax collectors and prostitutes, least of all the chief priests and elders of the temple. Even worse, no one wants to be told that the dregs of society, the lowest of the low are ahead of them in entering the kingdom of heaven. Isn't the kingdom of heaven for the good people, the people who are polite

and decent, agreeable and courteous? How could tax collectors and prostitutes be getting in ahead of the elite, favored class?

God's will is conditioned by His great mercy so that your past is no barrier to coming to repentance. Yours *self* is. The chief priests and the elders belong to that class of people who for whatever reason, most likely pride, will not repent. So Jesus comes to them. Maybe if they don't like the idea of tax collectors and prostitutes going on ahead of them, they'll rethink this.

We know we're doing the will of the Father when we come to Him and confess our sins and repent of them. We are able to do this because Jesus comes to us and calls us to it. Jesus exerts some kind of spiritual gravity on us. When he said in John's Gospel that when he would be lifted up from the earth he would draw all people to himself, this is what he meant. He draws us to Himself. He's determined to bring us to repentance so that we may enter the Kingdom of heaven. That is the will of the Father. Amen.