

*The Unfairness of the Gospel: Who's in and Who's Out?*

A sermon preached by

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October 1, 2017

Matthew 21:28-32

*<sup>28</sup>“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ <sup>29</sup>He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>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.*

“A priest, a pastor, and a Rabbi were playing golf...” You may not know the punch line of this story but you have heard it or some version of it so often that you know precisely what to expect. You know there will be some religious interplay, perhaps a prejudice will be reinforced, and quite often Jesus will show up on the side of the Rabbi.

When Jesus says to his disciples in this morning’s gospel lesson, “A man had two sons...” the crowd doesn’t know exactly what’s going to happen next, but like every good formulation of a story or joke tradition they know some of the elements of the tale that are unchanging. The scriptures are full of the “two sons” tradition. There is Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Aaron and Moses. It is a tradition laden with themes of envy and betrayal, struggles for power, and occasionally reconciliation.

Today as our third graders received their bibles while their parents and sometimes their brothers and sisters looked on, that interplay takes on a renewed understanding. If these children continue to learn from the scriptures, they will learn that often the gospel truths are played out in the midst of family dynamics and even sibling rivalry.

At first blush, this “two sons” story seems pretty tame. The brothers don’t have some of the customary rivalry, one doesn’t seem favored over the other. No one is thrown in a pit, sold as a slave, or squanders his inheritance. It looks like it might be a Sunday School type lesson, something like, “Actions speak louder than words.” But, of course, it isn’t that simple.

Because a closer look reveals that Jesus tells this story after confronting some of the highest ranking and most powerful religious authorities of his time. These are folks who are in the “God business.” They deal in language, symbols, practices, and claims of truth that are supposed to be leading them toward a continuing encounter with the divine. And yet, it is Jesus who is giving them lessons in looking for God. Here is a Galilean peasant telling the religious elite of his time that they are *looking for God in all the wrong places*. Jesus begins by criticizing them for their failure to recognize his cousin John the Baptist as a prophet from heaven. And what he seems to be saying is that if you can’t see God in John’s work, how in the world can you see God in my work, and if you can’t see God in my work then how could you see God in other places and other ways. So, he arrives at the startling conclusion that even the tax collectors and prostitutes have a better idea of where God is than the religious professionals.

For them, and for many of us, that is the unfairness of the Gospel: that the socially out cast and the morally questionable folks on the margins of Jesus’ society might have a better pathway to God than those of us who set the alarm, roll out of bed on a Sunday morning to sit on hard pews, and suffer through what is sometimes a very warm sanctuary. Well that just isn’t fair. Because we thought we had this “Who’s in and who’s out” thing all figured out and yet like so many other of Jesus’ stories, our expectations are upended.

So instead of complaining about the unfairness of it all, perhaps we ought to be considering where we might be meeting God now? Where is God leading you or where are you working to nourish what you believe to be God’s intentions for the world? What vineyard will you work in, what places are you being called to encounter?

If you have ever seen work in a vineyard, then you know that it is slow, plodding, back breaking work. It is done one shoot, one vine, one row at time. I’ve been fortunate to live in two areas in Michigan where grapes are grown, and sometimes the pruning or planting or harvesting is so slow that it doesn’t even look like the workers have moved from one vine to the next. I think that is a helpful image for those of us who live in a world where instant results are often expected.

My newest, most favorite kitchen gadget is an Instant Pot, a combination slow cooker, pressure cooker, rice cooker, yogurt maker, soup simmerer...I think it might even brush your teeth if you let it. And the magic of this thing is how fast it cooks: 25 minutes for a whole chicken, 20 minutes for brown rice. I’m not getting a cut on this thing, but Nora can tell you I

have been somewhat obsessed. Anyway, a couple of days ago I looked up Julia Child's Beef Bourguignon recipe thinking, I bet the Instant Pot can make short work of this 4-hour process. But I stopped because I thought, the best thing about her beef stew is the half day of anticipation that it takes to make it in the traditional way.

And maybe if we can look at our lives that way, we might savor the moments of now in our world and understand that we are on a slow and steady journey, not a bullet train to God. I think that is why Jesus tells this story, because working in a vineyard implies patient, hard work. Progress does not occur unless people come back and resume their work day after day, usually in groups.

If we fail to do so, it does not necessarily mean we are evil or worthless people. The religious authorities Jesus criticizes in the Gospels were not, either. But Jesus insists their vision had become too limited. They weren't able to see what Jesus saw. Their imaginations were too small. Perhaps Jesus thought their view of what was possible had withered.

Because God might be there, out among the vines. God might be waiting for me to transform my good intentions into actions, not merely to keep me busy, but because of an eagerness for me to recognize places where God can be encountered and God's intentions actualized.

That is our calling, and in reality it is far from unfair...in fact it is the very way that we Christians define justice. So, let's go do the work, it may take a while. Amen