

A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 21A
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Jesus' story of the two sons in today's Gospel lesson has special resonance for me, because I have two teenaged boys. Not that it's common in my household for one of the boys to say he will not do something and then go ahead and do it anyway. But on almost a daily basis I discover that my sons have said they would do something and then failed to do it, or failed to finish it. Sometimes they even say not just that they will do what I ask, but that they have done it when they have not. And the only times they behave like the first son, who says that he will not do what he is told and then does it, are when the time between the refusing and the doing is filled with argument, revoking of privileges, and other unpleasantness until the cost of disobedience is finally high enough that obedience seems the better option, even to a teenager.

Not that my boys are bad boys mind you. They are usually cooperative and willing, often generous and thoughtful, and, I'm told, uncommonly polite and helpful to adults who are not their parents. But they do have growing a sense of entitlement that lets them think that their time is their own, and that if they would, say, prefer to play video games than do homework or take out the trash, no one should have the right to tell them otherwise.

But Jesus isn't really talking about teenaged sons here – his words are directed at the prominent members of his faith community, and he is talking about them.

Priests and Elders, the story said, and no doubt the Elders included among their number those particularly pious folks known as Pharisees. Pharisees, you may recall, were not priests or functionaries of the Temple or the Synagogue. They were members of the congregation who were well enough off that they were able to make a pledge to live by all of the rules set down in the Hebrew Scriptures. Because of their purity of life, they believed their high standing with God to be secure, and many of them felt entitled to criticize and condemn the actions of others in their community who didn't live up to their standard of conduct.

Perhaps you know people like them. They whisper about their neighbors, or correct them in public, usually by politely saying something like "I know you mean well, but that's not the St. James' way." They may seem hypocrites, holding others to higher standards than they hold themselves. They may resist change, working secretly or openly to undermine it even as they acknowledge the need for change with their words.

Which is to say that they are like all of us. For who among us has not at one time or another enforced, or at least wished to enforce community standards? Who among us has not at least rolled our eyes at people who propose off-the-wall ideas, or who don't seem to know how to behave, or who don't know when to shut up? There is a little bit of the Pharisee in each of us.

And Jesus doesn't just tell the leaders of his faith community to tone it down, to lighten up a little on those who don't have the means or the understanding to follow the rules. No, he tells them they have got it exactly backwards—they need to become the opposite of what they have been, that indeed the people they think of as their opposites are achieving exactly the relationship with God the leaders have worked so hard for, while the leaders themselves are being left behind. Community rules and strict biblical standards and purity of living are not going to get anyone into God's good graces.

But then what will? Are we to become tax collectors and prostitutes? Outcasts and outlaws? Will that get us into the kingdom?

Of course not. While Jesus gets the leaders to admit that the first son, the one who said "no" but went to the vineyard anyway is the one who did his father's will, he doesn't hold that son up as the ideal. It's really that unmentioned, imaginary third son, the one who says he will work and then goes to work who is to be our model.

That, of course, is the son the Priests and Elders think they already are, the one who is perfect in his obedience. And that is what makes it so hard for them to hear the lesson behind Jesus' words. Moreover, they think that the tax collectors and prostitutes and those unruly crowds that show up wherever Jesus appears are actually like the fourth imaginary son – the one who says he won't go and work and doesn't go and work. No

wonder the leaders are offended that Jesus gives those people priority, not only in this life, but in the reign of God that Jesus describes.

So there are not just two, but four hypothetical sons to help us understand our relationship with God and what God desires from us. And if we can't always find the strength or courage to be the one who both says yes and acts, at least we can be the one who gets around to it eventually. Jesus, at least, seems to understand that saying yes to God may be too hard or scary sometimes, and is willing to give us the benefit of our own doubt, and let us work it out in our own way and on our own schedule.

But when we do decide to go to the vineyard and work, how do we know what we are supposed to be doing? We know that we are all called to proclaim with both our words and our actions that we have heard God's call and are cheerfully doing the work that we have been called to. But what is that work? Where is the vineyard to which we are being sent? How do we know what we are called to do, so that we can joyfully say yes to that calling?

There are, to my way of thinking, three kinds of vocations: three ways God calls us to live out our faith in the world.

The first, the simplest, is just being there. When you are on hand, and there is need, that is a true calling. When you find yourself at a fire, it is your calling to pass the water buckets. When someone near you stumbles, it is your calling to help them up.

When a need arises that is beyond your skill, but you are the only one nearby, it is your calling to get help, and to do what you can until help arrives.

What we are available to do is our first calling.

The second kind of vocation is that which comes from our gifts. You are called to use the gifts that God has given you to accomplish the reign of God. If you have a voice, it is your calling to sing. If you have brains, it is your calling to be wise for God. If you are strong, God needs your arms.

This is particularly true of the things you are best at. Those gifts God has given you, God calls you to use in God's service.

And there is at least one thing that each of us is better at than anyone else in the world, which makes it one of our truest callings. And that is telling your own story.

Recounting the history of God's mighty deeds of salvation in our own lives is each of our gift and each of our calling.

Although, of course, if we are all to be able to exercise that calling, we must also recognize that we are all called to do something that we might not be any good at at all, and that is listening. Just as it is all of our calling to tell our own story in the way that only we can, it is every person's calling to listen to the unique versions of that story that others tell, a calling that is, in the end, a gift to both listener and teller.

Our gifts are our second calling.

Which brings me to the third kind of calling, which might be the highest form of vocation: the things that give you joy. I'm not talking about pleasure here – you well know that many things which give us pleasure are things which God is definitely not calling us to do. But joy is another matter entirely. It's what the disciples were talking about after they met Jesus on the road to Emaus and heard Jesus retelling his own story when they said, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he spoke...?"

The things that make your heart burn within you, that make you aspire to be better than your best self, that make the world seem a little brighter and clearer while you are doing them – these things are also a true calling, and both a sign and the means whereby the reign of God touches our lives.

The Priests and Elders heard a call from God to live according to God's Word. This was, I have no doubt, a true calling. They were available, gifted with the means, and no doubt got joy from living out that calling. Where they messed up, though, was in thinking that God had called them to that disciplined life in order to lift them up above the others of their community and of the outside world.

What being called, what being chosen by God always means, is to be called into a life of relationship—of community with God and everyone and everything that God has made. Although we may be called into positions of leadership, we are never called into positions of superiority. We are called to serve, and the higher we rise, the more people we must serve, following the example of Jesus who, as the magnificent hymn

in Philippians that we read today tells us, because he is the highest of all, is servant of all.

Servant of all is, of course, way too high a calling for any of us. It would be another form of Pharasaic arrogance to think we could aspire to it. But we can aspire to be the servant of all those we know. To welcome the strangers who cross our paths, to honor the gifts and callings of those in our community, to lead when we are called to lead and to follow when others have that honor. To listen, especially to the voices of those whom we have ignored or mistrusted, and to tell our own stories in humility, with God at the center and not ourselves.

And if we could learn to be glad of the news that others are entering the kingdom ahead of us, rejoicing that God has loved and welcomed those whom we have difficulty loving and welcoming, not caring what order we arrive as long as there is a place for all of us, then we would truly be doing the will of the one who sends into the vineyard.

Amen.