

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 27, 2020

N. Farnham & St. John's Episcopal Churches – The Rev. Torrence Harman

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4; Matthew 21:23-32

There were two sons. Some significant Bible stories begin this way. These are family stories. Memorable and applicable to Bible audiences since everybody listening to the story has been part of one, a family and its stories. Sometimes it is more interesting to hear stories about other families than face what is going on in one's own. And yet, strange as it seems, there is an underlying similarity between our own and others. Sometimes the resemblance is startling.

Such stories in the Bible usually involve a twist of some sort. Maybe an unexpected outcome or uncomfortable application for those listening to the story. Take Esau and Jacob in the Book of Genesis. Jacob, second son, gets the blessing and inheritance that should have gone to Esau, the first born, according to the cultural norms of the times. Then there is the story of the dutiful son and the prodigal squandering son in the Gospel of Luke. Guess who gets the big hug from Daddy, a ring on his finger and a pig roast party with friends. Wow! Does the Father love the prodigal just as much if not more than the dutiful one? Not to leave the gals out, think of Martha and Mary, two sisters. Worker bee Martha, just sitting around Mary: guess who gets the praise, guess who gets the criticism? When a story surprises, sometimes we are more likely to remember it whether we like the outcome or not.

In this morning's Gospel passage Jesus tells a story to those who have just confronted him and questioned his authority. His story audience are the chief priests and the Jewish elders. They come questioning Jesus. Their goal? To trap Jesus into committing blasphemy, a sin against God, a crime punishable by death under the Jewish Law. They want him gone. He's turning over too many tables, not just those of the money changers in the Temple the day before, but they way they think life should be under their interpretation of the law. They are also trying to discredit him in the eyes of his followers and discourage others from joining up with the radical Jesus movement that is infesting their world. "By what authority are you doing these things?" Their question is designed to be confrontational and to trap Jesus. Instead of answering their question Jesus turns the tables on them and spins a story about two sons.

Jesus begins: "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' The first son answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second son and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go." Jesus lets the story sink in for a moment then asks the priests and elders: "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They can't wait to answer. They are the eager ones in any classroom waving their arms and shouting out an answer without thinking it through – which can get troublesome when we grow up into the far more complex school of life and relationships.

If they had taken a minute to think through the story and where Jesus might be going, they might have stopped, stroked their beards, pondered the chess moves that Jesus may have already played

out in his mind. They should have paused and then instead of answering, spun another question into the dialogue. Or better yet turned their back on him and simply walked away to plot their further moves and confrontation another day.

But they didn't. They fall into Q&A trap Jesus has set for them when they answer: of course, "the first son."

Of course. Jesus doesn't disagree. Their answer is right. But here is the twist, the surprise, the unexpected outcome. When they answered Jesus' question, they were sentencing themselves to an outcome they did not anticipate. They didn't think through the reality that Jesus was really talking about God's vineyard. The vineyard being God's "family" business with a vision of fruitfulness and abundance when lovingly tended, nurtured, cared for, to yield abundant fruit on its vines, fruit to be gathered in to become wine upon which to feast. And that such an outcome needed everyone in the family to work towards that outcome.

Being targeted as the second son who said he would work in his father's vineyard but then did not. Jesus accuses the religious leaders of Israel of being like the second son as he points to them and says: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes (folks the priests and elders considered the scum of the earth) are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

Jesus has used a simple family story: a father, a family business (the vineyard) and two sons. So simple that the priests and elders completely miss the potential for the facts of the story to be relevant to them, God, and the business of God's vineyard, Israel.

The chief priest and elders absolutely believed they were all about God's business. Actually, they thought they were better at it than anyone else. They had committed their lives to it. This was their elected profession. They liked being identified with God, living the role of priest and elder. And they loved their elite status as leaders. Boy, they could talk the talk and look the part. But there was a problem – called "follow through" – the real work of this family business as God is showing it to be through Jesus.

The problem was they did not want to do the work the business of family involved: tending the vineyard. They wanted to be part of the family, be sons with all the privileges that might offer, but they weren't willing to do what it would take to work the soil, tend the vines, nurture the growth of the fruit, help harvest it. It not awn on them that by not tending the vineyard, they might not get to feast at the table, might find themselves outside the vineyard as the Kingdom of God came to fruition.

I am reminded of the children's story of the Little Red Hen, clucking her way through the barnyard encouraging everyone in the barnyard family to help her with the process that would lead to a fragrant loaf of bread. "Who will help me," asks the little red hen. Most respond "Not I!" I don't remember any of the other creatures saying, "I will" and then not showing up to do so, but there may have been some. I don't remember any of the "Not I's" changing their minds

and then pitching in, but there may have been some. But I do remember that those who did not ultimately show up to help in the process ended up not feasting on the fragrant bread since they did not offer themselves or any effort to help in the creation of its nourishment.

What I do know about the story of the vineyard is that it is a story that Jesus wants us to hear. It is not just for the ears of those around him who considered themselves faithful members of God's family back then. It's a story that confronts us with just what we are willing to do as we identify with God's family today but pick and choose what we are willing to do, where we are willing to go, when we are willing to participate in the tending of the Divine vision for the vineyard and how we are willing to relate to God in a process that always gives us a choice – to participate or not.

So often when I read one of the Gospel stories, I want to add to it. Imagine some more facts. Make it easier to figure out, offer myself more interpretations. Here I really want there to be yet one more son, one more child. One that says, "Here I am, I'll go. I'll work for you, Father" and then do it, with an open heart, a clear vision, strength and purpose, and sing as I work, have plenty of food to fuel my spirit, peaceful rest throughout the nights, perfect relationships with the other workers in the field, Basically, to have the environment and the work to be the way I want it, not the way it might turn out.

As "wanna be" followers of Christ, we are children who have said, "I want to be in this family. I want to be a child of God. I want this family to thrive and multiply in good health, generation after generation. For myself and the ones that come after me I want the Divine love, protection and abundance that this family can offer and I want to please that Divine authority that offers me and my progeny these things." I believe that is what all of us want and so we have signed up to do what it might take to help God make that happen. But the times can make it difficult to follow through. There are times the way gets really tough, the weather gets really bad, there are forces which work against us. In such times it is a struggle to sustain the vines, encourage growth and fruitfulness. Not to mention protecting the vineyard and the vines from predators, disease, and diminishment.

These are difficult times, so much is happening to weary us, to divert us, to lure us away from the work that needs to be done to be trusting and trustworthy workers in the vineyard. It is easy to become like the Israelites in our Old Testament passage this morning, finding themselves in the wilderness between their old life under the authority of Egypt, freed from that enslavement, their deepest desire to reach the Promised Land, promised to them by their God, yet finding themselves, tired, discouraged, thirsty, hungry in the harsh and demanding environment through which they must pass to finally arrive into the land of abundance their God offers.

At a time such as this, whatever it takes, whether we signed up for this journey and have tried to be faithful to it – whether we signed up but have fallen by the wayside over and over again – whether we never really committed to it before but are given the chance again – whatever whatever we did or didn't do in the past to work towards the vision of God's kingdom on earth - NOW,

dear God, may we find the strength to try again, to be part of the yet to come that you, God, are trying desperately to bring to fruition in us and in the world around us. Strengthen us, grace us that we respond with whatever little or much we may have to offer to your vision and may we be not be wearied away by this calling . . .

Torrence