

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 9/28/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Matthew 21:28-32

Since the beginning of this liturgical year last Advent, we've been working our way through the book of Matthew in our Gospel readings, though not every portion of the text has been included in our lectionary. Jesus is now in Jerusalem, where he's gone ballistic in the temple, accusing those in charge of turning a house of prayer into a den of robbers. He's healed people who have come to him right there in the temple. He's been teaching in the temple. The tension is thick; tempers are flaring. And the religious authorities are asking Jesus, rightfully, "Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to do what you're doing here on our turf? By what authority are you doing these things?"

Jesus' response to that question is what today's gospel is about. And, as is often Jesus' way, he doesn't answer the question directly, but instead tells a story. A man who has two sons tells the first son to go and work in the vineyard. The son initially refuses, but then changes his mind and does the work. The man tells the second son to go and work in the vineyard. This son says that he will, but he doesn't. Jesus then asks those who are listening to him, "Which son did the will of the father?"

In a culture in which honor is highly valued, the answer here isn't completely straightforward or obvious. Neither son is fully honorable in this story. The first son shames his father by refusing to obey, but then does the honorable thing by changing his mind and going to the vineyard to work. The second son says the honorable thing upon the initial request, but his subsequent actions shame his father, when he doesn't, in fact, do what he said he would do.

After consideration, the religious authorities give Jesus their answer: It's their opinion that the first son – the one who refused to do what his father has asked of him, but then changes his mind and works in the vineyard – is the one who has done the will of the father. Jesus doesn't praise them for their correct answer. Instead, he compares them to the other son – the one whom they've determined has not done the will of the father.

Why are they like the second son? Not, apparently, because of what they've said or not said, or done or not done. According to Jesus, in this particular text, the religious authorities are like the second son because of their lack of response to John the Baptist.

I'd imagine their reaction to Jesus here would be what mine was when I was struggling with this passage all week. John the Baptist? Where did he come from all of a sudden? What does he have to do with this story or the circumstances that prompted it?

The clue seems to be in the last line of the text: Jesus says, "You (the religious authorities) did not change your minds." Do you remember what John the Baptist's message was? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." "Repent" means "to change direction." John had called his hearers to turn around, to see things anew, to embrace a different vision, of themselves and of God. Those whose lives were a mess

and who had nothing to lose responded. Those who thought they had it all together couldn't and didn't respond. It was as if they had blinders on, and couldn't see or hear anything other than the reality on which they were focused and in which they were deeply invested. They were heading one particular direction, and there wasn't room in their minds or their hearts to consider anything different.

Jesus' words to the religious authorities in this story might prompt us to consider our own ability to change direction in response to the movement of God's spirit in our lives. Are we heading one way with such determination in our career, or in our home life, or in a particular relationship that we're ignoring the nudge of the Spirit of God to turn around and consider something different? Do we feel stuck on a particular path in our work, in our families, in some aspect of our lifestyle, or in relationship with a specific person simply because the pattern has been well-established, and because the known and the familiar is less threatening than what's unknown and unfamiliar, and because it takes so much energy to do things differently, even when we want to?

In a few moments, John Ryan Ottaviano will be baptized. In the liturgy for baptism, six questions are asked of the candidate, or, in the case of an infant, of the candidate's parents and godparents. The first three are about the candidate's intention to turn away from all that pulls him from God and God's intentions. The next three are about the candidate's intention to turn toward God and God's intentions. In the early church, baptisms were usually done on Easter morning, preferably at dawn. The candidates would face west, toward the darkness of the setting sun, as they renounced all that might draw them from the love of God. Then they would change direction, literally and physically turning around to face the light beginning to shine in the east, as they accepted Jesus as their Savior, and stated their desire to trust in his love and follow him as their Lord.

Turning toward God isn't something we do once, at our own baptism. We have the opportunity to make the decision to turn toward God every time someone is baptized, as we renew our baptismal covenant. And, we have the opportunity to do it hundreds of times each day. In what might God be calling each of us to change direction? Of what do we need to let go? What's keeping us stuck? Of what are we afraid?

And to what new reality of God's love are we being invited to turn toward? Amen.