

Minor Daily Miracles – a Parable of Becoming

Year A, Proper 21; Matthew 21:23-32

Grace Church, Newton, MA

October 1, 2023

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I always wondered what it would be like to preach on this gospel passage with one of my sons in the congregation. Today, we'll have a chance to see. One of my sons is with us today, and what follows is with his permission.

So, in today's gospel, we hear a father ask his two sons, in effect, to help with the chores. A man went to his sons and asked them to go work in the vineyard that day. If we were to describe a similar scene in today's terms... at our house, at least, the parable might go something like this, "A woman had three sons; she went to one of them and said, "Son, please take out the trash today." He answered, "No. Why can't one of my brothers do it instead?" But the woman nagged him enough that he finally did it anyway. The next week the woman asked a different son, "Could you please take out the trash today?" He said, "Sure, Mom. I can do that." But then, he got busy and hours passed, and he completely forgot. But the next week – a minor miracle happened. The woman asked her third son to take out the trash. And he said, "yes." And he did it! And no one had to nag, and no one forgot, and the woman's husband didn't even have to sneak the trash bins onto the neighbor's side of the street the next morning so they could be picked up on the second round through the neighborhood. So, this is how that same scene might unfold today.

But, Jesus, being Jesus, he wasn't just offering a random hypothetical situation. He had begun his question with a phrasing that signals that he was inviting his counterparts into rabbinical debate. "What do you think?" he asks, as he begins the parable. In response, everyone in this scene seems to know the answer to his question. "Which of the sons did the will of the father?" It was the first son. Even though his initial response was a bit rude, in the end he had a change of heart and behaved in a way that was consistent with the father's request, with his obligation to do as his father asked. He changed his ways. He turned back toward his father. He repented. So, he was the son who had done the father's will. That was pretty clear to everyone in the conversation.

At this point you may be thinking, "wait a minute. So far, this doesn't really sound like a typical Jesus story." Usually, Jesus stories are...less transparent...less straightforward than this. They're a bit trickier to respond to – sort of like the earlier question Jesus asked about whether John the Baptist was of heaven or of human origin. Tricky question.

So what's Jesus' point with this straightforward story about the sons, and the chores, and the doing the father's will?

To try to gain insight into Jesus' meaning, it may be helpful to consider today's gospel passage in its full context. We begin today's reading from Matthew at chapter 21, verse 23. But in the first 22 verses of this chapter, a lot has happened. Jesus has been busy. The chapter starts with Jesus entering Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, throngs of people along the streets spreading their cloaks and palm branches on the road to line his way. They greet him with shouts of "Hosanna to the son of David!" In effect, calling him a prophet, and the heir of David, the revered king of the Jews. Then Jesus went straight to the temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the merchants who sold livestock for temple sacrifice. It's quite an entrance he's making.

Following his encounter at the temple, he went to the house of friends, slept, and in the morning returned directly to the temple. Which is where today's passage begins. It seems pretty natural that when the temple authorities saw him that following morning, they would ask him – "By whose authority do you do these things – parading into Jerusalem, drawing crowds, turning over the tables in the temple that are here to support our worship and sacrifice? Who gave you this authority? Who told you you could do these things?"

If you think of it from the perspective of the chief priests, they had Jewish law on their side. They were in charge of what happened in the temple, and they had not authorized this!

With that as background, it may help us understand more about why Jesus presented this apparently easily-answered parable of the father and the sons and the vineyard. I wonder if it's less about who is doing the will of the father, and more about being able to change one's mind, to turn in a new direction.

The first son – though he did initially respond with a bit of an attitude – changed his mind and went to the fields. Similarly, the tax collectors and the sinners Matthew refers to, after spending time with John the Baptist, they recognized that he was sent by the God to herald the coming of a new kingdom. The temple authorities, on the other hand, seeing these same signs from John the Baptist, did not believe. They refused to change their minds.

I wonder sometimes whether we're sort of like the temple authorities. Sometimes change can be hard. We can become attached to the way we do things. And yet the world around us is changing. The circumstances of the church have shifted dramatically. As we begin this new time together, I wonder...what might it take for *us* to be open to change?

Perhaps one way of thinking about it would be...less that word I used earlier, “repentance” – turning FROM something – and more like a “continuous becoming.” That as individuals and as a community together we are invited into ongoing transformation. God calls us into deeper and deeper relationship with God and with each other, and through this movement we continue becoming. How might we open our hearts and our spirits to hear that call from God? How might we help each other along the way?

You know, I’ve always wanted a third response to today’s parable of the father and the sons and the vineyard. The way it’s written, one son says “no,” but then turns up. Another son says, “yes,” but then doesn’t go. I’d like a third path – the one that seems like the minor daily miracle in our modern rendition of the parable. In this third response, the son says “yes,” AND he does it. And the nagging is less. And there’s less sneaking the bins across the street to try to get the trash picked up anyway. Because you know, as the woman’s sons grow, as they continue *becoming*, such minor daily miracles happen more and more. The sons were where they needed to be then. And now, they’re where they need to be today. These things unfold with time. At God’s invitation, we continuously become.

I’m told that at last Sunday’s vestry meeting *this* question was asked of the vestry members: “How would you describe the feeling at Grace in this moment?” From what I read, many powerful images emerged from this discussion. One in particular seems fitting in response to today’s gospel. Someone offered this: it feels like “jumping off a high cliff...[but] with wings.”

What an evocative image. I can feel it. Can you feel that? Hesitation, and fear, and uncertainty. Not knowing what comes next. AND at the same time...a sense of expectation, excitement, anticipation. And readiness. How are we called to become now? In what ways are we being called to change? What transformation awaits us?

So let’s take a deep breath, open our hearts wide, unfurl our wings, and trust that as we take this step, the winds of the Spirit will be here to lift us up and sustain us. To carry us to new places. I wonder what *we* can become together?

Amen.