

Sermon – October 1, 2023

Pastor Dan Hollis

Matthew 21:23-32

Albert Einstein couldn't talk until the age of four. It wasn't until he turned seven that he learned to read. He was expelled from one school and rejected from another.

But I think it's safe to say that, eventually, Albert Einstein came around.

Stephen King's first novel was turned down by publishers thirty times, causing him to toss the manuscript in the trash. If it wasn't for his wife Tabitha pulling it out and encouraging him to keep at it, "Carrie" would never have seen the light of day, and Stephen King would be just another Mainer. Oprah Winfrey, Terri Gross, Sidney Poitier, these are all people who took the long way around from failure to success. Their stories could have just as easily gone the other way 'round, but finding their way through that winding, circuitous journey was no accident.

The parable Jesus tells in our Bible reading for today is about "coming around." About taking the long way around, but ending up where God needed you to be in the first place. We may not all have the luck of the rich and famous, but finding our way in this life isn't down to happenstance. All that we need to find our way 'round to where we need to be is at our fingertips. The question is, are we reaching for it, or are we pushing it aside?

In our Scripture reading, the chief priests and the elders of the temple are in a pickle. John the Baptist, a prophet of the Lord, has been going around preaching, baptizing, and preparing the way for Jesus Christ. But these officials don't want to believe anything he says. This new message is a threat to their power, so they can't acknowledge his words come from God, but the *people* love him, so they're afraid to say out loud that they think he's making it all up. Then along comes Jesus, doing and saying a lot of the same kinds of things, and the officials ask him under who's authority he's *doing* all this.

Jesus points out how hard of a time they're having recognizing *John's* authority, and so—to help them understand—he tells a story, about a man and his two children. Their father asks them each to go and work in the vineyard for the day. The first son says no, he won't do it. The second son, *immediately* and with the utmost respect, agrees to his father's request... however, he never actually *goes* to the vineyard. In the end, it's the *first* son, the one who *ignored* his father's request, who changes his mind and gets to work. Jesus asks the officials which one of the children did what their father needed of them, and obviously the answer was the *first* son. Even though things didn't *start* off well with him, he came around in the end. After all was said and done, *he* was the one who ended up in the vineyard, not the son who obeyed with his *words* but not his *actions*.

Then Jesus said to the officials: the people you despise the most, the people who live lives you look down on as unclean or unworthy, the kinds of folks who couldn't *possibly* hold a candle to how "holy" you temple officials are... they are going into the kingdom of God *ahead* of you because *they* have come around to God's way of thinking. They have put their faith in John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth and the love of God... *they're* in the vineyard, and you—holy as you are—are nowhere to be found.

That was part of why the officials were having such a hard time. It was hard for them to believe that God would want anything to do with tax collectors or sex workers or lepers or foreigners or even *children*. And yet those are the kinds of folks John and Jesus spent a lot of their time with.

God has a relationship with *all* people. *God* is always reaching out, making an effort to connect with us and be there for us. So the question becomes, are we gonna leave God hanging?

In Christ's story, the first child said he would *not* do their father's will, yet eventually found himself in the vineyard after all. And the *second* child *promised* to do the father's will... but didn't.

I don't think any of us in this day and age are strangers to the idea of the second child. Those who *say* they will do something, then don't. Those who say they're one way, and then prove by their *actions* that they aren't at all. Two-faced. Lip-service people. Folks who pride themselves on being caring or reliable or selfless, when they aren't anything of the kind.

More and more these days, it seems there are a lot of people like that who call themselves Christians. People who pay lip-service to God—who invoke Jesus' name at every opportunity, but whose actions don't resemble Jesus in any way. People who profess faith in Jesus for political gain, or for societal street-cred... while abandoning those in need, spitting on the oppressed, wasting and destroying God's Creation, spending money on swords instead of plowshares, and hating their enemy.

It's easy to hear Jesus talk about the second child in this parable and understand what he's talking about. The *first* child, the one who said they would *not* do the work but eventually *did*... that's a little more complicated.

Ever since I became a pastor, there have been people confiding in me how worried they are about their children, or their grandchildren. They tell me they don't have faith. They don't go to church. They aren't raising their children to believe in God. They don't pray, they don't walk with God.

There's sadness there, but there's also fear. Does that mean my child, my grandchild, is going to go to hell? Does it mean they are alone in this world, without the seal of God's protection and care?

And the most heartbreaking question of them all: Where did I go wrong? How did I fail my children and my God?

But as human beings, our connection to God isn't one-way. The words and teachings and the very existence of Jesus Christ make that clear. It isn't just *our* relationship with God... *God* has a relationship with *us* too. God has a relationship with us regardless of what we say, do, or believe.

What I tell those members of our congregation who are afraid for the souls of their children, is that even if they have chosen not to walk with God, God walks beside them all the same. Whether you believe in God or not, whether you have *faith* in God or not, God loves *you* and has *faith* in *you anyway*.

And our reading today reminds us that that very *relationship* with God can be *transformative*. Whether it's our faith in God or God's faith in us, faith itself brings transformation. It's possible to end up in the vineyard even if you start *out* as far away as anyone could. The officials kept failing, even as they paid lip-service to God, where so many they would *never* expect... succeeded. And yet Jesus himself kept trying to bring those officials around anyway.

In this church we practice open communion. *Anyone* is welcome to take part in Communion, even if you don't believe in my understanding of God, or in any God at all. This table is an opportunity for all of us to open ourselves up to the possibility of a transformative experience. To take a chance, to reach out, and see if you can feel anything reaching back.

Even atheists are welcome at this table; all you have to do is want take part. That's a symbol of our belief that God has a relationship with *all* people, and even when we fail to recognize that relationship, God's transformative work can still be done within us and among us. That's how powerful God is.

*Nobody* has a perfect relationship with God. Both of the children in our parable today had *some* kind of relationship with God, and each one represents different points on the wide spectrum of faith.

*You're* here, in this place now, because—I hope—you desire a closer relationship with God. Or a... deeper connection with something beyond words. Even if you're just seeking, and you don't know what you're seeking for.

God has a relationship with *all* people. The ever-twisting journey of faith is the way we explore and take part in that relationship. Like the second son, you may stumble, your grip on God's hand may slip... but like the first son, you can always find your way back around.

And really, every *one* of us has a growing edge, something to work on that will bring us into a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God. To say *yes* to God, to *mean* it, to *live it out*, and to strive to keep on saying yes every new day.

May we have grace for those who fall short in their own ways, just as God has grace for *us* in all the ways *we* fall short. And may we pray, always, that the faith God has in each *one* of us will truly transform us all. Amen.