

September 27, 2020  
Lectionary 20, Year A  
The 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Matthew 21:23-32  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Zoom Worship  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### Stay in the Game

In today's gospel reading Jesus tells another parable. That's how Jesus liked to teach, by telling stories that the hearers could apply to themselves, to their situation, to their question, and hopefully gain wisdom and insight. Jesus really wasn't a question answerer. Jesus was a story teller and a wisdom bringer, he helped people find their way to their answers connecting his stories with their questions and helping them learn to follow God, to learn faithfulness in new ways.

So, when the religious leaders asked him a question in today's gospel reading, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?", Jesus didn't answer the question. Instead he asked them a counter question, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

But they didn't answer; they couldn't answer. Whatever answer that they gave would have gotten them into trouble in some way. They had a private debate about it, saying to each other, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

The best answer that they could come up with was "We do not know," which in some ways, is a wise answer. It's good to know when you don't know.

But it gave Jesus an out. Since they didn't answer his question, he didn't have to answer theirs.

Of course, Jesus wasn't really looking for an out. He was looking to teach, to help them come to the wise conclusion, to get them to put aside their pride in their own authority and seek the way of wisdom that sees and interprets new things rightly, in accordance with received tradition, interpreted for a new time.

So, Jesus didn't answer the question. Instead, he did what he so often did. He told them a story.

Today's gospel reading is 287 words long. The story that Jesus told is 54 words of that 287 word gospel reading. But it's a story that delivers. It's a story about two sons and which one does the will of his father.

A father said to two sons, "Go and work in the vineyard today." The first son said that he wouldn't go and later changed his mind and went and did the work that his father had asked him to do. The second son said that he would go, but then never went and did the work.

Jesus' then asked the religious leaders another question, "Which one did the will of his father?"

This time they had a ready answer. "The first," they said. The one who at first said no, then had a change of heart. An argument could be made that he repented of his original answer to his father, and went into the vineyard and did the work that his father had asked him to do. That was the one who had done the will of his father.

The other son, the one who had said yes and then hadn't gone, clearly hadn't done the will of his father. He had said yes, but he hadn't done the work. Obedience isn't a word only thing, it has to include action.

Then Jesus makes the point of his story clear; that the religious leaders weren't doing the will of God. Because they were willing to talk the talk about faith, but they weren't willing to walk the walk. They weren't willing to repent.

That was the message of John the Baptist, the message that they had rejected. Repent! Change--For the kingdom of heaven has come near!

But the religious leaders were way more willing and interested in talking about God, in pointing out other's people's sin, in living in the comfort of moral superiority, than they were in change, in repentance, in welcoming those they had labelled sinners.

But I wonder if it had always been that way. I'm going to go back to the parable that Jesus told about the two sons and the father's vineyard.

I wonder if the second son, the one who said yes and did not go, knew all along, even when he said, "yes," that he wasn't going to go.

I think maybe he didn't. I think that maybe he thought he would go, maybe he meant to be obedient, maybe he even started to get ready to go. But then something distracted him. Maybe he remembered something that he had been meaning to do. Maybe he still felt like he was going to go and work in the vineyard, but then some friends showed up and asked him to go out with them. Maybe he figured he'd go to the vineyard when he came back home. Maybe he figured that a couple of hours wouldn't hurt.

Or maybe he said, "yes," then he looked at the vineyard, realized how much work there was to be done, and decided that he couldn't do it, didn't have the energy for it, didn't feel well, wasn't up to the task.

Maybe he remembered that his brother had said "No," and he thought, "Why should I go and work in the vineyard when my brother is going to sit at home and do nothing?"

Maybe his brother's disobedience, in word, though not in action, gave him the excuse to be disobedient too.

Maybe, by the time his brother was out in the vineyard, working in the sun, the other son, the one who had said, "yes," was already in the house, taking a nap or out with friends, and he never even noticed that his brother had, ultimately, obeyed his father and was hard at work in the vineyard.

I wonder if the religious leaders had started out when they were younger, filled with a desire to serve, with a desire to be close to God, with a desire to live the words that they found in the pages of scripture, fully, deeply, meaningfully, in ways that made them fulfillers of and recipients of the promises of God.

But then, I wonder if, as they got older, they got distracted, or disappointed when things didn't work out the way that they imagined that they would. I wonder if they began to learn that obedience in practice did not immediately lead to blessing, not in the ways they had expected or wanted. I wonder if they decided that authentic obedience was too hard when something more on the surface would do the trick.

I wonder if they saw the lives of those who had never studied scripture, who had never even pretended to obey and thought, "Why should I work so hard, when those other people are living a good life in their sin."

I wonder if they came to a place where they chose the trappings of religion, just enough "yes" so that they could look down on the sinners who said, "no" but not enough "yes" that they actually made their way to vineyard of God?

So today, I'm going to tell you a story. I'll call it, the "parable of the soccer game".

Since three out of my four kids have spent time playing soccer, over the years I've gone to a lot of soccer games. I've seen kids play in driving rain. I've seen kids play in freezing rain. Unless there's thunder and lightning or the grass on the fields is going to be destroyed if the kids play on it, the game must go on. I've seen kids play in freezing cold. I've seen kids play in weather that was so hot that I thought that I might melt just sitting on the sidelines watching the kids run their hearts out in the heat.

It was a game like that. It was midday on a field with no shade. It was hot. There was no breeze. There was no cloud cover. In some ways, I'm sure it was a beautiful day, but it was not ideal soccer weather. It was Cyrus's game and his team

was getting beat. Three of his teammates hadn't been able to make it to the game, so they only had one sub. Cyrus's coach did his best to give his player chances to rest and take water breaks, but he could only do it one kid at a time, and none of them got many breaks.

One of the kids, who had played hard and well all game went to play goalie at the beginning of the second half. At that point the score was one to three. During his time in the goal, two more goals went in, making the score one to five.

Julia used to play goalie a lot and it always made me nervous. I know that kids feel the pressure of that position. Of being the last person that the ball goes by before the other team scores. But that's the point, right. The goalie is the last person the ball goes by before the other team scores.

In order for the other team to score, your team's offense has to lose control of the ball and your team's defense has to be unable to get the ball back up to your offensive side.

The goalie doesn't "let the goal in". The ball has to get past every other player on the goalie's team in order for the other team to score. The goalie is not the person who didn't stop the goal. The goalie is just the last person who didn't stop the goal. So, while being goalie is a hard position and can feel high pressure, the goalie is just one person on the team and keeping the ball out of the goal is the responsibility of everybody on the team.

The kid who was playing goal might have needed to hear this philosophy, because he seemed to get really upset when the second goal went in. The coach moved him out of the goal, gave him a break and put him back out on the field. But for him, the game was over. He had given up. He basically stopped playing. His behavior said that he thought there was no point in trying, no point in playing, maybe because he felt like he had let his team down, maybe because he was too hot and tired to try to push himself to win a game that, at that point, he felt was unwinnable.

Was the game unwinnable? Probably, but not definitely. It certainly didn't help to have one position where the player wasn't playing. Whether it would have made a difference if he had been playing his hardest when he was back on the field, I don't know. I do know that the final score was two to six. One of Cyrus's teammates scored another goal for his team and another goal for the other team got past the goalie who had replaced the demoralized one.

I think that if you had asked that kid, the kid who stopped playing at the end of the game, because he felt like it was too late, like the game was already lost, like there was no point to running and sweating and trying in a game that was already over in terms of the score; I think if you had asked him that morning, when he was getting ready for the game, eating his healthy breakfast, putting on his uniform and cleats, if he was going to be on the field, but not playing for the whole game, I think he would have said, "Of course not."

I think that he probably started out excited about the game, hopeful, ready to do his best. But then, when things didn't go the way that he had hoped, when disappointments came, when he himself had what he probably felt were some bad moments in the goal, even though really, no failure in a team sport is the failure only of an individual, he gave up, he lost heart and lost hope, his yes turned into a no.

Unlike the son in the parable, he at least started doing the work that he had been asked to do, but then when it was so much harder, so much hotter, so much more disappointing than he had hoped it, became easier to quit than to keep on trying.

If you're within the sound of my voice this morning, if you're here at zoom worship, if you're watching this sermon on YouTube, if you're reading it in your home, you're probably a religious person. I know that I'm a religious person. We're those people, being asked by God, "Will you go and work in the vineyard?"

At some point in our lives, all of us have probably said, “Yes.” And I think that all of us, at some point, did, in fact, go and get started in the vineyard.

But friends, you know and I know, that the work is hard. There are times when people that we love have refused to join us in the work in the vineyard, we know that it can be hot and lonely in the vineyard. There can be times when it feels like we find more disappointment than fulfillment there.

An argument could be made that we’re living through one of those times, when we don’t get to worship the way that we might want to, certainly not in the way that we’re used to, when we can’t experience the fellowship and support of our friends in Christ in the in person, physical, tangible way that we’re used to. When we’re singing alone. When even potlucks and shared pots of coffee are being denied us. When we can’t get together to finish quilts. When we can’t visit each other in person.

It’s hard to be in the vineyard right now. It’s hard even to know how to keep the work going, let alone do it. It can feel like we’re already defeated.

But, friends, we are not. The victory that belongs to Christ is still ours by God’s grace. It is ours to live, ours to share, ours to celebrate, as we worship in new ways, as we find new ways to show each other love and care, as we find new ways to serve a world that certainly needs the presence, the passion of people of good news, people who have hope, people who believe in justice and peace, people who speak words of love and support and encouragement into a public sphere where anger and hatred and meanness be the only way to win people’s attention.

So, we stay. We stay in the game. We stay in the vineyard, trusting that God who has called us here, will be with us in the vineyard and will give us co-workers for this work. Trusting that God will give us what we need to do the work that we have been called to do. That is the joy that we find in the vineyard, not that it

is easy work, the presence of God and companionship of each other as we learn new ways to live and share our faith.

Thanks be to God. Amen.