

Rev. Lynne M. Ogren
October 1, 2017

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, Montana
17th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
Matthew 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

What do you think?

“A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, ‘Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard.’ The son answered, ‘I don’t want to.’ Later on he thought better of it and went. The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, ‘Sure, glad to.’ But he never went. Which of the two sons did what the father asked?” (*The Message*)

What do you think?

A professional football player in the public eye decided to take a knee at the playing of the national anthem to draw attention to the disproportionate number of blacks who are killed by police in this country. Is this a disgrace to the flag or is it an American exercising his right to peaceful protest?

What do you think?

The rhetoric against the religion of Islam has risen in recent years. Is there a Muslim threat in the world? Or is there a threat to Muslims, especially to those who make up the 99.5% of that religion who are not radicalized?

What do you think?

There are Alaskan villages that need to move inland because of the rising ocean waters onto their shores. Glaciers are melting at rates faster with each passing decade. Hurricanes and other tropical storms happen more often and with more intensity. Is Climate Change a natural phenomenon that was inevitable or is it being intensified by greenhouse gases generated by human decisions and activity?

The parable Jesus told is so cut and dried. Of course the son who actually followed through with working in the vineyard did the will of his father. The purpose of a parable is to make a point and the simpler the story the easier it is to draw the conclusion of the teacher.

But in the current day examples, asking the question “What do you think?” becomes more complicated. There are extenuating circumstances. There are back stories and facts or rumors that come from various sources, each with their own motivations and biases. It is up to us as individual, thinking human beings to determine for ourselves what it is we think about these questions. It can be overwhelming.

What the chief priests and the elders may not have understood is that in the parable is that THEY were the second son who said they would work for the father but then did not do it. Jesus follows his lesson by saying that the rejected ones of society—the ones who seem to

live in opposition to God—are the ones who will enter into the kingdom of God first because they heard John’s preaching and believed him.

As the designated leaders of the faith the chief priests and elders were threatened by John the Baptist. They could not hear his message through their fear and suspicions.

Jesus gives the Jewish leaders—and us—an open door to move from a place of unbelief to a place of faith and servanthood. Jesus gives us the possibility of changing our minds.

It takes great strength to change one’s mind, especially about controversial issues of the day. We are expected to take a stand, on one side or the other, or with one leader or another. In some ways it seems like strength of character to plant oneself in one camp and stay there with loyalty and conviction.

Jesus told the church leaders that they could have changed their minds if they had paid attention to John’s proclamation that the Lamb of God, the promised Messiah was coming. They could have opened themselves up to the possibility of God’s promise being fulfilled and then they would have recognized Jesus for who he was. They could have changed their minds and believed.

But they had their reputations to uphold. They were prominent citizens. The Roman government had given them power to be not just religious leaders but civic leaders among the Jewish people. It was their job to keep the peace. They had the history of the priesthood on their side. They had money and it was up to these leaders to maintain the temple and to be keepers of the theology for their people.

Then John the Baptist came on the scene preaching that the kingdom of God was coming near. Both John and then Jesus were stirring up the people. They were preaching that a life of faith required repentance—a turning from a life of selfish gain and self-preservation to a life of trusting in God’s blessings and of service to neighbors of every walk of life.

Jesus was teaching on the hillsides and in the synagogues. People were learning what the love of God looks like in the flesh. God was with them and they were being changed!

Jesus was healing and freeing people from the diseases that enslaved them. He was reuniting them with their communities and giving them a taste of God’s promised future for them and for all people. A future in which all are fed, all are healed, and all are welcomed into the kingdom of God. We know these stories and we have experienced Jesus’ power and presence in our own lives, just as these first believers did.

So Jesus also invites us to be open to the possibility of changing our minds. That takes being open to learning and to repentance. We learn by listening to the voices around us. Are any of these simplifying the facts to lead us to their predetermined conclusion?

If so, then it is up to us to listen to more than one point of view, both the voices of authority and the voices of those who are often ignored or dismissed. Then we can gather what we have heard and learned and compare it to the Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Paul reminds us what that means in his letter to the Philippians. Jesus lived a life of love and humility, in service to a hurting world. Paul calls Christians to be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord with the life and love of Christ Jesus.

That's not an easy thing to do, and we will not always agree on every issue of the day. But when we get to the very core of what it means to believe in and follow Jesus, we can come together as a community in which we believe each person has value, and love and service rise above tradition and political posturing. Paul calls us to be communities of faith that are formed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Lutherans teach that faith is a gift from God, a gift that comes with the power of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. And as much as we can rejoice in the gift of faith, we can also work against it by the voices we choose to believe in the world. If we are open to the possibility of changing our minds, we give room for the Spirit to work on changing our hearts.

And when we become confused by all the messages around us, when we are not sure what we are to believe, or when we realize that it is time for us to change our minds, we have the promise of forgiveness. God's forgiveness allows us to start fresh, to have a new outlook, to see people through the eyes of Jesus.

This morning we will gather at Christ's table where all receive enough, where we are fed with Christ himself, and we are renewed with his power to serve a world in need of God's love and grace.

We are always learning. We are always growing. We are always in need of God's grace and forgiveness.

May our learning lead to lives of faith and service that shine with the love of Christ.

Thanks be to God! Amen