

September 25, 2011

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Gospel Reading Matthew 21: 23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "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?" And they argued with one another, "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." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not,' but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same,; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe in him.

Turn, then, and Live

Imagine being uprooted from your home and sent on a journey of over seven hundred miles. Imagine how it might have felt to have the temple that has been the center of your rituals of worship for almost four hundred years - destroyed. You may have been asking why did this happen? What did we (Israel) do wrong? Why is God punishing us?

The prophet Ezekiel lived among these people, these Hebrew people, exiled to Bablyon. As a priest he probably had his own questions. But as he searched for answers he also answered God's call to serve as a prophet to God's people, giving them new answers, turning them in a new direction. He reassures the Israelites that God has not abandoned them. Even in this new land God will be with them. In chapter 34 Ezekiel gives us God's promise "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep....I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, (he goes on to tell us) but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

For the first time in their lives the people of Israel are being given the message that their covenant with Yahweh continues, no matter where they are. The past no longer predetermines the future. The individual as well as the nation has an obligation to respond to Yahweh, and this obligation centers on the commitment, even a reorientation, of the heart. Just keeping the law is no longer enough. One must "cast away their transgressions and acquire a new heart and a new spirit' if they want to live. He reassures

us that God wants us to live. Ezekiel says to those who found themselves captured and living in exile in Babylon, “Turn, then, and live.”

But what is it that we are turning from and what is it that we should be turning to?

This idea of turning away from our actions that we have done in the past to live a new life is at the core of the concept of repentance. The Greek word that is most often used in the New Testament and in the Greek Septuagint (Old Testament written in Greek) is *metanoia*. *Metanoia*/repentance refers to changing ones mind due to a feeling of regret or remorse. True repentance requires a change of heart—a new spirit. For both the Israelite and the Christian it means to turn away from sin and back to God. We are reminded that sin is rooted in a wrong relationship to God. It is only through repentance that we can uproot that sin and change our focus from ourselves to focusing on others and God.

But how then should we live?

Using the NRSV translation the Psalmist proclaims:

Make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths.

....he instructs sinners in the way....

He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

The Psalmist instructs us in the importance of acquiring the value of humility.

When Ezekiel was preaching to those who found themselves exiled in Babylon the idea of changing the way they lived was earth shaking. At that time social stature was of primary importance. What you did determined who you were and how you ranked within that social structure. Imagine their reaction to the idea of acquiring the virtue of ‘humility.’ But I believe we can make the case that Ezekiel did just that. They were to change their focus. They were to turn away from their sins of arrogance and selfish pride. And one of their greatest sins, which was repeated by the Pharisees of Jesus’ time, was to participate in the pretense of ritual. In the letter to the Philippians we read “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” While Israelites and later Christians performed their ritual actions, too often they just went through the motions, Moreover, they did not act with their whole being, they did it from selfish ambition or conceit. They thought that they were better than those who did not participate in the rituals. Too often these rituals were just for show. Humility was totally lacking.

Turn, then, and live.

The motif of change, turning around, continues in our Gospel text. There are two sons who have both turned 180 degrees. The first son initially refuses to work in the vineyard, but then has a change of heart and goes to work. The second son implies willingness to go, but then doesn’t follow through. We could speculate on why each son changed their mind, did the first one feel guilty, did he see disappointment in his father’s face, was the second son distracted by other business, or was he just tired of always doing his father’s

will. It doesn't really matter why they changed their minds, what is important that Jesus is providing us with a parable that shows us it is possible to change our minds. It is possible for us to turn, and move in a different direction. Our past does not have to dictate our future.

Today we are focusing on Creation Care. How, therefore, might these texts help us to discover what God has to teach us about caring for creation.

How many of us see ourselves in that first son. We are asked to work to help preserve God's creation and for whatever reason, we fail to answer that call. Perhaps it isn't a priority for us. Perhaps we don't believe that climate change is a reality, or if we believe it is real, believe that there is anything we can do about it. Why should we sacrifice some of our comforts, our ability to buy a big house, or drive a gas-guzzling vehicle, or purchase whatever it is we think we can afford. Don't spoil our fun. We've worked hard to have the 'American' dream. Don't try to make us think about using less and recycling more. And yet that is precisely what we are being asked to do. Like the Israelites living in captivity in Babylon we are being given the message to "Turn, then, and live." Turn away from a life based on social standing and live instead a life rooted in humility. Put the interests of others ahead of our own. Like the first son we believe we have the right to live life as we want to live it. And how often have we watched others act just like that second son, agreeing to participate, agreeing to act, but then not carrying through on their actions. "What a hypocrite we cry? At least I'm not pretending to change. I'm not acting like the Pharisees. There is no false piety here."

Change is difficult. It is hard to really look at our needs instead of our wants. It is challenging to do with less when there is so much advertising out there, telling us to buy, buy, buy....But what about the earth. The population is increasing exponentially and yet there is no corresponding increase in available resources. What is going to happen when the resources we have are used up. When there isn't enough food grown to feed the world's population. In our hubris we tend to respond, 'that won't affect us. I won't be around to see it?' But what about your grandchildren, or your grandchildren's grandchildren? What kind of world are we living for them? Like the first son perhaps we do not see working in the vineyard as our responsibility.

And yet, for some reason, the first son did repent of his choice, and went to work. Perhaps it is also time for us to change our direction and go to work. It is not something that can be put off to tomorrow. Be aware that there is an immediacy to this call for action. It is not enough to nod our heads in agreement, saying yes, yes, this needs to be done, and then go about our day to day life.

Today the Creation Care Team is asking you to start small, take a single step toward caring for creation. We are asking you to participate in the Minnesota Energy Challenge. For the next eight weeks reduce your carbon usage and increase recycling. All the small steps that each of us take, when added together can bring remarkable results.

We need to recognize that now 'is the acceptable time.'

Now is the 'day of salvation.'

Lastly, we must never forget that the ability to do this, to truly repent, to change directions, to turn away from sin, and turn to God, is possible only because of Jesus' saving actions. He is truly the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep.

Dear Lord, Help us to turn and live. Lead us and teach us your ways, cast away our transgressions, give us new hearts and new spirits. Nourish us as we join with you in celebrating you Holy Communion. AMEN