

Ordinary 26A  
September 28, 2008  
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

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Exodus 17:1-7    Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16    Philippians 2:1-13    Matthew 21:23-32

The Father's Will

It's been back-to-school time these past few weeks, so I've been reminiscing about my old school days. I remember the excitement I felt as the new school year approached. Most of that excitement had to do with all the new "stuff" I'd be getting for the school year: new pencils, new tablets, a new lunch box, and a whole lot of new clothes. Then there would be the new teachers to meet, and possibly even new friends. All sorts of new adventures.

But as we grow up, there's very little that's new that brings the same sort of excitement. Maybe there's "newness" of travelling to some place different. But even when travelling there's usually a yearning for the old and familiar. Perhaps this is why, when some people travel, they seek out the familiar in those new places. Maybe this is why people will travel half-way around the world, and still seek out a McDonald's, when there's one just around the corner from where they live. Perhaps finding comfort and reassurance becomes more important to us than being adventurous, like when we were children.

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In order for us to begin to unravel what's going on in today's Gospel reading from Matthew, we need to first look at the setting of this text. This text occurs shortly after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The people were excited, because here was the promised Messiah. Jesus was something new, something different, with the promise of much better things to come.

But somehow, Jesus didn't quite turn out to be who the people thought he was. Just before today's reading was Jesus' first entry into the temple. He saw all the commerce being conducted in his Father's house. He flew into a rage. Jesus tossed aside the tables of the moneychangers; he upset the businesses of those who sold the necessary sacrificial animals. I can imagine that he was in quite a huff when he left the city that night.

Then we come to today's reading. Jesus has re-entered the Temple on his second day in the city. He is immediately challenged by the elders when he began to teach. They want to know by what authority he teaches. Jesus answers their question with a question: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

This was a no-win question for the elders. If they said that John's ministry was of divine origin, they would have to admit that John – and Jesus – had divine authority in their ministry. If they said it was not, they would be putting down the

ministry of someone who was very popular with the people; they would risk an uprising. So they simply respond, “We do not know.” The elders take the safe route, and stay within their comfort zone.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the two sons. The father asks each of them to go work in the vineyard. The first one says, no, he won’t go, but then later changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard. The second one says, yes, he’ll go, but does not go. “Which one,” Jesus asks, “Did the will of the father?”

This question would have posed another serious quandry to the elders. They’d already learned that waffling and giving Jesus a “We don’t know” response won’t work, so they know they have to choose. But in their hearts, the elders wanted to say, “Neither son did the will of the father.” For you see, in their culture, both sons would have brought shame upon the father, the first by disobedience and the second by lying. In their culture, shame and honor were of paramount importance. Neither son would have been considered right.

So the elders choose: The first son did the will of the father. They reason that even though the first son was initially disobedient to the father, he at least saw the error of his ways and later went to work in the vineyard.

And the pity thing is this: The elders were right. This was the answer Jesus was looking for. And yet, they suffer a harsh rebuke from Jesus. Jesus tells them

they're right, but then says the tax collectors and prostitutes – the lowliest of the low in Israelite society, those who are considered outside of God's grace – will get into Heaven before them.

What's going on here?

In his parable, Jesus likens the first son to the tax collectors and prostitutes of his day. Do you remember that Jesus had been criticized for associating with them? And yet, these people came to believe that Jesus was who He said He was. They were like the first son, who was initially disobedient but came to see the error of his ways.

So in his rebuke, Jesus is telling the temple elders that they are, indeed, like the second son. They've done the wrong thing, and failed to see the error of their ways. They've failed to see that the kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus. They've failed to believe that He is the promised Messiah. And what's more, they are so set in their comfortable old ways, they can't even begin to entertain the notion that God is doing something new. That something new is Jesus.

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I wonder how many times we fail to appreciate the goodness in something new in our lives? We get so comfortable in our old ways that the thought of something new becomes threatening and unwelcome.

William Willimon, teacher and bishop of the Methodist church, tells the following simple story:

“My wife announced that we needed to get rid of that old chair in the living room and buy a new one. And I responded: ‘What’s wrong with this chair? It’s a perfectly good chair. Why, we’ve had it for 30 years.’ I know – it had a leg almost chewed off when our dog was teething, but the slipcover hid that. Some of the springs were sagging and the cover was a little worn. I announced: ‘This is a perfectly good chair. Why they don’t even make chairs this good anymore.’ My wife shook her head and walked away. Eventually, of course, I gave in and we got rid of the old chair and had this new thing delivered. I came in one day after work and the living room looked different. The new chair has changed the whole room. It was beautiful. I sat down in the new chair and you can imagine what I said: ‘You know, this new chair doesn’t sit quite as well as the old one.’”<sup>1</sup>

“We all have trouble dealing with the new,” he says.

And that’s it in a nutshell: We all have trouble dealing with the new. We get comfortable in our set old ways. The new becomes an unwelcome intruder into our lives. The new is often seen as threatening. The new <*GASP!*> might cause us to change.

There's an old joke that's been making the rounds here at the church in the past week or so. It goes like this: How many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb? Change?! Who said anything about change!?!

There's a reason that this has become a joke. It's because we Lutherans are notoriously set in our ways. We like things to stay the same. I'm sure you've seen it. Take, for example, every time we get a new hymnal. I've been through three hymnals in my lifetime: first the red book, then the green book, and now the red book again. And there are some who still pine for the "good old days" of the black book, the hymnal that came before the first red book. Do you remember the feeling of unease that comes with every new hymnal?

Change doesn't come easy, especially when it comes to our worship lives. I wonder how we got this way? After all, change is our inheritance from the Reformation. It was Martin Luther who paved the way for people to be able to read the Bible in their own languages. He also said that exactly how we worship doesn't matter, as long as the Gospel is preached and the sacraments rightly administered.

Martin Luther rightly saw that God was doing a new thing in his time. He saw that the comfortable old ways of the church had ceased to bring the comfort and assurance of life in Christ as God has intended. He recognized that it was time to do the will of the Father in restoring to all people the proper preaching of the Gospel

and the right use of the sacraments. Yes, it was time for a change, but Luther's change restored comfort and assurance, the comfort and assurance that is only possible when we hear and experience ourselves living in the arms of a loving God.

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And so I ask you: Are we ready to hear the voice of God speaking to us, calling us to new ways of doing His will? Or will we become like those temple elders, who were so set in their ways that they could not embrace the fact that God was doing something new in their midst? Are we, like Martin Luther, willing to reach out with the Good News of the Gospel in new ways, ways that will help them to better embrace the God who has first embraced them?

I'll be honest with you: I don't currently have any plans for us to change. But I would like you to consider the possibility that God is calling us to be His people in new ways, for the sake of the Gospel and the world. I'm willing to hear any ideas you might have. I look forward to talking with you all about new ways that God may be calling us to be His people. For the church is best the Church when it learns to live in unsettled ways, for the sake of proclaiming the Gospel in new places, in new situations, and to new people. We can sacrifice some of our comfort for the sake of the Gospel, for we have the ultimate comfort that we are God's people. This is when we will fulfill our Great Commission to make disciples of all people.

Amen.

<1,745 words>

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol 36, No. 3 (Inver Heights, MN: Logos Productions, 2008), 54.