

## **"Show Me!"** (Matthew 21:23-32)

In 1936 the King of England shocked the world. He had told an American woman named Wallis Simpson that he loved her, but, then, many kings have told women that they loved them...and then sent them off with broken hearts...or severed heads! But King Edward VIII didn't intend to just say he loved Wallace Simpson. He wanted to **do** something to **show** his love to Wallis. By British law, he wasn't allowed to marry Wallis since she was a foreigner, a commoner, and a divorcee. So, he gave up his crown. Out of his love for Wallis Simpson, Edward gave up the glory, power, splendor that came with being king of England. He did something to show her his love. Perhaps King Edward VIII provides us with a little bit of insight into our gospel story for today.

Jesus had moved into Jerusalem. He had allowed the people to lavishly welcome him on what we now celebrate as Palm Sunday. He had cleansed the temple. He had cured the blind and the lame who came to him in the temple. And so the chief priests and the elders asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?"

To answer their question, Jesus told them a story, a story about a man with two sons. The father went to his first son and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." But the son answered, "I will not!" However, later he changed his mind and went and did the work his father wanted him to do. The father went to the second son and said to him also, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." And this second son said, "Okay. I'm on my way, sir." But this son didn't follow through on his words—he didn't go work in the vineyard. Jesus asked the priests and the elders, "Which of the two sons did the will of his father?"

They answered, probably without hesitation, "the first—the one who said he wouldn't go work but then ended up doing what the father had asked."

Having received their answer, Jesus went on to interpret his story. He told them that in his story, God was the father, and the son they themselves declared good represented tax collectors and prostitutes. Tax collectors and prostitutes had at one time turned their back on the Heavenly Father, refusing to do his will, but now many of them, because of Jesus, were ending

up doing God's will. And yet, they, the priests and the elders, had declared that they would do God's will, but now, when Jesus came with the Heavenly Father's instructions for them, they stubbornly refused to recognize that Jesus' authority came from God. They refused to do what God wanted them to do. So Jesus told the priests and elders, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

Now, it's easy, for us to listen to today's lesson and take it historically. "That was great how Jesus put those priests and elders in their place! He really told them!" And it's easy for us to listen to today's lesson and store it away as ammunition to be used against our children and grandchildren. "Jason, remember that story Jesus told? You need to listen to me, and do what I say. Be the good child. Do the will of your parent."

Yes, it's easy to make these uses of today's lesson. It's easy, for it's comfortable for us. But friends, neither of these uses is what Jesus intended in telling the story. First of all, the Bible is not just a history book. It's the living word of God. It's one way that God has conversation—communicates--with us today. In the Bible, God is speaking directly to us, talking to us about the daily choices we make—how we're living our lives. And secondly, the story is more than a story. It's a **parable**, and thus it's not about earthly parents and children at all. As a parable, it's a story about God, us, and God's kingdom.

Now, it's obvious that the father in the parable is God. But who are we? According to John Henry Newman<sup>1</sup>, that same son who represented the priests and elders represents us. Newman said that it's in "our nature" to "promise to serve God" but then to "not perform." We readily say, "Yes, we'll go. Yes, we'll work for you, Heavenly Father." For isn't this what we did when we made our confession of faith and when we were baptized? But how often do we actually follow through on our profession of love and actually do what we said we would do?

Today's lesson isn't the only time Jesus talked about the importance of following through and doing. In another parable, Jesus invited different persons to join his band of disciples. They all had excuses. One said,

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<sup>1</sup> Newman, John Henry, "Promising Without Doing"

"There's a death in my family." Another said, "First I've got to go home and say goodbye to my family." After which Jesus said, "Anyone who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God." Another time Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who **does the will** of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21). Or, as one of the New Testament writer put it, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (I John 3:18).

It's very clear that Christianity is not just talking. Christianity is about doing--living, responding, learning, improving, growing, maturing, giving, forgiving, serving, and loving. It's about recognizing and accepting the authority of the one we love. It's about doing the will of the one who has authority over our lives. A man had two sons. One was a talker. The other was a doer. "Which one of them did the will of the father?"

Today's lesson from our Lord is meant to call us to examine ourselves. By whose authority are **we** doing what we do? Is it by the authority of the crowd—the authority of society? Society tells us to look out for number one. Society tells us to covet. Society tells us to not go against it. Or, is it by our own authority that we live our lives? We want to do this, and by golly, we have the right to do what we want to do. Let's face it, we rugged, independent Americans, in this denomination in particular, are free thinkers. Or, do we recognize the authority of God over our lives?

I read about a woman in Australia who received some publicity for working innovatively with children who had been crippled with infantile paralysis—helping them walk. Sister Elizabeth Kenny became known all over the world. Sister Kenny visited the US and gave her treatments in several large hospitals. One day when she was being praised, she said, "I'm no genius. I'm just a very ordinary person who still remembers and puts into **action** the stories my mother told me from the Bible." Sister Kenny had learned about Jesus, and she recognized his authority over her. As a result, she lived her life being obedient to him, showing her respect and love for her Lord. That's the way Jesus intends us to live also. We're to be living in the kingdom of God, doing what we can to increase his kingdom—overcoming evil with good, meeting cruelty with love, returning kindness for rudeness, serving.

George Barna, a church growth expert, asked a group of pastors how they believed Christ would rate their church if he were to return today. Fifty-three percent—more than half--of those pastors said Jesus would rate their church as having little or no positive impact on souls or society. If I had been part of the survey, we would have brought the average up.

For I could have reported that the members of this church recognize the authority of the Heavenly Father. We're going into the vineyard, being obedient to him. That's what our Circle Ministries are all about. When we feed the homeless at ReStart or a hurting family at Hospice, we're going into the vineyard. When we weekly stuff food into backpacks so that children will have some food on the weekends, we're going into the vineyard. When we provide Angel Food for those in our area, we're going into the vineyard. When we support the poor children of Kabul, Afghanistan, we're going into the vineyard. Yes, we understand that Jesus intends us to not just say we love him but rather to show him we love him by rolling up our sleeves and getting to work. Therefore, we're busy working to carry on Jesus' ministries, to build his kingdom, one person at a time, by showing compassion, forgiving, doing justice, working for peace within and amongst ourselves, giving hope, and building community.

There's a great scene near the end of the movie "My Fair Lady" in which Liza Doolittle sings words that God must also sing. She says, "Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! I get words all day through; first from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do? Don't talk of stars burning above. If you're in love, show me!...Never do I ever want to hear another word. There isn't one I haven't heard...Don't talk of love lasting through time. Make me no undying vow. **Show me now!**"

A man had two sons. One was a talker. The other was a doer. "Which one of them did the will of the father?" Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; September 28, 2008