

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

September 28, 2008

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

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

Did anything stand out for you this morning as you listened to our readings? Anything that might have an impact on your life and experiences as a Christian?

As you know, we are in the longest season of the church year, the season of Pentecost. This is the time of year when we really focus on how we live out our lives as Christians. We look at how do we put into practice those things that Christ has called us to do? We consider how are we becoming the unique persons that God has called us to be. A few weeks ago we paused and asked ourselves if we have noticed any changes in our lives or if any specific thing has happened to us during the weeks that have followed the Day of Pentecost, now, almost five months ago.

So let me ask again, has anything happened that anyone would like to share? And as you think about this morning's lessons, did anything stand out for you?

Well, a couple of things stood out for me today that I think can help us as we continue on our spiritual journeys. A couple of concepts that we may be able to apply frequently, if we keep them in mind.

The first comes from the Gospel lesson and looks at two sons and how they each respond to a request from their father. Both sons are asked to go and work in their father's vineyard. The first son says no, but then thinks better of it and goes. The second son says yes, and then does not do what he said. What did you think of the sons as you heard that story?

For some time we, as individuals and as a church, have prayed and asked to be guided as to what we should be doing as Christians. Each week here at church, and hopefully, each day during the week, we ask to be made "Instruments of Peace".

So let me ask you another question. If you really felt that you were called to do something, you felt it, you could just "hear" it, how would you respond? If our heavenly Father asked you to go and work in his vineyard, the world in which we live, how would you respond? This could be a challenging question for us, particularly if we were not too comfortable with what we felt we were being asked to do.

C. S. Lewis, writing about the importance of making the decision to really do what we are called to do, to being willing to step away from our comfortable existence and become Christians, wrote: "*Die before you die, there is no chance after.*" For Lewis, making the decision was very important.

Writing on this parable of the two sons, Scottish New Testament Professor, William Barclay, wrote:

*“The meaning of this parable is crystal clear. The Jewish leaders are the people who said they would obey God and then did not. The tax-gathers and harlots are those who said that they would go their own way and they then took God’s way...there are truths in this parable which go far beyond the situation in which it was first spoken.*

*“It tells us that there are two very common classes of people in this world. First, there are the people whose profession is much better than their practice. They will promise anything; they make great protestations of piety and fidelity; but their practice lags far behind. Second, there are those whose practice is far better than their profession. They claim to be tough, hard headed materialists, but somehow they are found out doing kindly and generous things, almost in secret...They profess to have no interest in the Church and in religion, and yet, when it comes ‘down’ to it, they live more Christian lives than many professing Christians. Barclay continues:*

*“Further, this parable teaches us that promises can never take the place of performance, and fine words are never a substitute for fine deeds...Here we learn that the Christian way is in performance and not promise, and that the mark of a Christian is obedience graciously and courteously given.”*

So when the day comes, perhaps today, and you feel that you are really being asked, called to step out and become Christ’s hands in the world, what will you do? And if you are not certain, if you are a bit uncomfortable, what could you do that would help you make your decision?.

First, you could ask yourself if what you sense that you are being called to do will take you toward or away from your goal. If your goal, our goal, is to become more like Christ, if our goal is to become “Instruments of Peace”, let’s ask: “Will this action take us toward that goal or away from it?”

Second, you could consider these ‘sources of counsel for Christians’ from the workbook “Decision Making for the Missionaries.”

First, look to scripture. Then, *consider non-Christian experts in the field: Others do not have to know God for God to use them.* Next, talk to your Christian friends, how do they see it? And always look for your inner guidance: ...sometimes the best decision is an intuitive one where you follow an inner sense that “this is the way to go.” And finally, always remember to pray. *Choose and offer your decision to God asking God to adopt what is right and to correct and overcome what is wrong.* Scripture, non-Christian experts, Christian friends, inner guidance and prayer. They all can help.

Choosing to say “yes” when we are being called to do God’s will can be a little intimidating, clearly, but think how fulfilling it will be also.

The second thing that seemed to stand out came from the first lesson, the story in Exodus about the Israelites’ journey from slavery in Egypt to their new life, in a new land that had been promised to them.

Today we heard that the Israelites had camped on their journey, and that there was no water to drink. Last week in the alternative reading we heard that in a previous camp there was no food to eat. In both cases they complained and quarreled with Moses. In both cases they “remembered the good old days” back in Egypt. And as they looked at their present circumstances they complained. Do we ever do that? Do we ever focus primarily on our challenges and overlook all of the things in our lives that are going well and all of the progress that we are making on our journey through life, our spiritual journey?

As we seek to do those things that we are being called to do, as we seek to become “Instruments of Peace”, there is no question that challenges will come. The question for us to look at is how will we respond when they do come. So let me offer a suggestion.

In the Psalms we are told that God is not interested in our dramatic sacrifices. In Psalm 50 we read that God is not interested in the bulls that were being sacrificed. Instead, He wanted a sacrifice of “praise and thanksgiving”. Think about that. God wants us to thank Him and praise Him.

Bible translator and interpreter, J. B. Phillips, has suggested that “the only offensive weapon we have is praise and thanksgiving.”

And in his very popular book, *Prison to Praise*, author Merlin Carothers describes the surprising benefits and life changing experiences that come from practicing praise and thanksgiving in all of our experiences. Yes, all experiences. In both good experiences and bad experiences we should be thanking and praising God.

So, as we continue our journey through Pentecost, as we seek to be “Instruments of Peace”, as we seek to be the individuals that God has created us to be, and as we seek to live out our lives as Christians, remember two things: First, when you hear or feel a call to act, to put your Faith in Christ into action, your response and your actions are very important.

Second, as you respond and live out your calling and active life as a Christian, challenges will come. And when they do come, remember all of the blessings you have received. Remember the times you have been helped, and then remember to offer praise and thanksgiving for all of your experiences, the blessings and the challenges.

AMEN

