

17th Sunday after Pentecost September 27, 2020

Matthew 21:23-32

“Later he changed his mind.” What happened between no and go?

What happened between the one son telling his father he won't go and then changing his mind? The language used means something like changing one care for another. One value for another.

There isn't much to go on in the story. The father doesn't seem to badger him, just accepts that he won't go and moves on. But something changes his mind, moves the son to accept that the concern of his father for bringing in the harvest is more important than whatever motivated him to say no.

I've been curious about and pondering for years what leads people to change their minds about something they are dead set on. I've been especially curious about it over the last decade or so as we have become more polarized in our political discourse.

Human psychology is a wonderful thing, like the human body- God has created a complex and inter-related web that supports human thinking, behavior, and survival...but it does not always serve us well in a modern civilization.

We are designed for tribal thinking, the desire to belong, and ideas and beliefs about certain things make us part of a group and we aren't very good at distinguishing between staying part of a group for survival and staying part of a group that we are entirely free and safe to leave. The line between the two gets blurred for us and we find ourselves defending groups and the ideas contained in them at all cost.

If we think about it in some lower stakes venues of our lives, I think we would find this to be true of ourselves. I know that sometimes it is hard for me to accept facts about a sports team that I am invested in, even when there is a part of my brain that agrees with what is being presented. Why do I defend what even part of me acknowledges as indefensible? It's that tribal part of our human psychology.

With this bias existing in our psychology, the best way to change someone's mind is often not with logic, facts, or evidence. It is done through getting to know them and letting them get to know you. It is by building a relationship with them, a genuine relationship that removes that barrier created by the primal fear of losing our tribe. It eases the friction in our minds and allows us to more carefully consider what is presented to us. Knowing that even if we change our mind, we have someone who we can be in community with.

Jesus pretty clearly presents the tax collectors and prostitutes as the son who refused to go but then changed his mind. These are the ones who through their occupations and lives were considered to be in such a state of sin they could never fulfill their religious obligations. They were already out of the tribe of Israel, the chosen people of God, because of that. Condemned by God's own law.

And yet, their minds are changed. How? Through Jesus, God's own Son, God's best self-expression of who God is come to them directly. Entering into relationship with them. Both not condemning them for their lives up to that moment, but also not letting them stay there. Rather, Jesus lets them know the way is open to you still. Come, and follow me. And in that relationship of love the tax collectors and prostitutes changed one care for another. Their way of life and survival for the way Jesus showed them.

And now Jesus is trying to do this with the chief priests and elders. To enter into relationship with them and show them that the tribal beliefs they have actually aren't the totality of God's will. But they are so caught up in that belief system that they are willing to kill the Son of God to preserve it. Oblivious to what they are actually doing.

What happens between no and go? What changes our minds?

It helps to have the right frame of mind. This is one of the reasons I hang with the Christians who happen to be Lutheran. Our theology, our understanding of God and how God works in the world is built around a number of ideas that we hold to be true at the same time- even though they are opposites. We believe we are both saints and sinners at the same time. Both fully redeemed by God, welcomed into the kingdom with open arms- and fully convicted by God's law, deserving only of being thrown into the lake of fire for our sins. We believe that we need both God's Law- that shows us our basic inability to live as God has commanded and God's Gospel- the good news of God's unconditioned love for us as expressed in Jesus Christ.

This both/and thinking of our Lutheran heritage keeps us off balance- enough so that we don't get too settled on a particular way of thinking. Have you ever been playing Twister, or maybe a good game of hopscotch and found yourself overbalanced, teetering on the edge of going out of bounds and the only thing that saves you from a tumble is fully committing to jumping to that next square or placing a hand on that next color?

This Lutheran way of thinking gives us the gift of not settling too much on things that are not core to who God is- the particularities of our way of worship, how culture is at work in our living out the faith, a certainty of our own understanding of what makes someone acceptable to God.

This way of thinking means we are always open to the understanding that we might be wrong. The saving grace of this way of thinking is that the tribal culture we are part of is one that says you are open to accepting new ways of thinking. Of seeing new ways of living as being part of what it means to live a life of faith. As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we did this thirty years ago with the ordination of women. Accepting the biblical truth that women had been in leadership in Christ's church since the beginning. And we have seen the way in which God has blessed the church through their leadership. Here at St. John through Pastor Erika Uthe, now at Holy Trinity in Walford through our former member Pastor Michelle Schultz, and next month in the ministry of our bishop-elect Pastor Amy Current.

This way of thinking also accepts the reality that I may not always be as open to hearing the voice of Jesus calling me to a new thing as I might like to think. And this is where the often-unrecognized grace in this parable comes into play.

Jesus tells this parable to the chief priests and scribes and asks them which son obeyed the father. They rightly point to the one who actually did what was commanded, even though he had told the father no. They know what is right. What they don't see is that they are the son who told his father he would go into the vineyard and didn't.

But note well what Jesus says is the consequence for this, "the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." Did you hear the grace? Even these hard-headed chief priests and scribes will get into the Kingdom of God. It may be at the tail end of the parade, but God's welcome is large enough even for these who have refused to go into the vineyard. To do God's true work.

What saves us is God and God's grace. Period.

But, I don't know about you, but I want to be part of doing God's work- not hindering or at best ignoring it. I want to do God's will- not that of my tribe.

And so I pray, every day, change my mind, O God. Turn me from what a professor of mine called, stinkin' thinkin' ... turn me to Your will, O God. Get me off my butt and into the vineyard. Because it is there that I am doing your will. Because it is there that I will best experience your grace and love. Because it is only when I am doing your will and not my own, or that of my tribe that I can truly be saved.

Change our hearts, O God. Turn them from our tribal ways that lead only to division. Make them ever new in your image. Change our hearts O God, let them be like you. Filled with love, grace, and mercy.

What happens between no and go? In one word. Jesus. May you have that experience as well.