

“The Two Sons”

Psalm 100; Matthew 21:28-32

June 25, 2023

I read something this past week about bananas that was interesting. A few years ago, the banana industry figured out the exact shade of yellow which would sell the most bananas. Surveys determined Buttercup yellow bananas are more likely to sell on grocer's shelves than Vibrant Yellow ones. As a result of this, the industry subjected all their plants to conditions which grow bananas that ripen to a perfectly hued buttercup. And that would be great if the buttercup yellow banana tasted as good as any other banana. But it doesn't. You see, the growing conditions which make it ripen to buttercup yellow negatively impact its taste. It may not be as likely to be purchased in a store, but your Vibrant Yellow banana tastes better than their shelf-friendlier cousin.

It's the age-old dilemma of appearance versus reality. Things look one way but are something altogether different than they appear. It's such a common motif that it often makes up the center of dramatic plotlines. Shakespeare draws heavily on this theme in his plays. In one, Measure for Measure, the Duke of Vienna leaves town only to return in disguise as an old man so he can observe his subjects in his apparent absence. Lo and behold, what should he observe while disguised but his upright and prim deputy, the one he left in charge of Vienna in his absence, behaving very inappropriately. Here, this strait-laced appearing man turned out to be quite the crooked arrow.

It happens so often in our real lives as well. One time, back when I was selling cars at 18, two customers appeared on our lot at the exact same time. Now one of these customers was a married couple driving a late model sedan. The other customer was a man who pulled into the lot in what resembled a 1970's era pickup truck. Not only that, he looked scruffy, he had on worn out jeans, even had on a bandana. My colleague gave me the choice – which one did I want to work with? I made a straight line to the affluent-looking couple. I went up to them, gave them my best “how're you doing, what can I show you today.” Their reply. “We're just here to pick up a friend of ours.” My colleague who walked over to the scruffy looking man wearing the bandana? He sold that man two cars that day. One for him, one for his wife. And guess what? The man paid cash.

I think we've all probably got a story like that rumbling around in our heads somewhere. Sometime when the initial appearance of a thing was wholly opposite of what it actually was.

In this morning's New Testament reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus Christ tells a parable to the chief priests and scribes. Lying at its core is the disconnect that sometimes lies between appearance versus reality. Now keep in mind, by the time Jesus tells this parable, He's already made a splash in Jerusalem. He's entered into the city with a chanting crowd of followers. He's overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. Jesus cursed a fig tree for failing to bear fruit, a powerful image of indictment against the religious folks of the day. In all He's done since arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus called into question the practices of the quote-unquote religious people of the time.

Now, the chief priests and the elders need some answers. You see, they're the quote-unquote religious experts. And so they need to know on whose behalf someone would behave so outlandishly. Make no mistake about it, they're hoping to be handing Jesus the rope with which He'll hang Himself. So, they ask Jesus, on whose authority do you do these things? Jesus, however, does something that only Jesus can do in good conscience. He answers a question with a question. *“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”*

The query is weighted with significance. If John was a prophet of God, then there would be no reason why these chief priests and elders hadn't repented of their sins and changed their actions. And if John truly was a prophet, why weren't they doing what he asked of them? So, they can't answer Jesus saying John's baptism was from heaven.

On the other hand, if the chief priests and elders thought John the Baptist was merely a quack, they really couldn't say that either. In doing that, they'd offend the crowds surrounding them who were vocally supportive of Jesus. It'd be like being a New York Giants fan pulling boisterously for their team at Philadelphia Eagles stadium. So, they can't answer human origin.

In a way it's kind of like being asked the question “Have you stopped watching Desperate Housewives yet?” Merely answering the question divulges more info than you'd most likely want to

reveal. So, the chief priests and elders refuse to answer. It's here when Jesus tells them a parable.

I imagine this parable playing out in modern language like this. A father, needing some work to be done around the house, comes to his two sons laying on the couch just before he leaves for work at 8:00am. The TV is on in the den. The two boys are watching some cartoons. It's clear from their posture and the glazing of their eyes that they're perfectly content there in front of the television. Left to their own devices, they're likely going to be in the same exact place come eight hours later when their father returns home from work. So, the father tells them both, go and do some work around the house. Don't just sit there all day...do something. The dishes need washing, the laundry needs folding, the floors need vacuuming. When you're able, he tells them, just get up and help out. Now the father doesn't yell or scream or threaten. He just directs the boys to work. The first son hears his father's wishes and does a bit of quick mental calculation. He figures that his father won't be there all day to watch over him. As they say, when the cats away, the mice will play. So, the way he figures it, he's got far better things to do than work around the house when nobody's watching. He defiantly says "NO" to his father, barely averting his eyes from Spongebob Squarepants to reject the request. The second son, looking like a modern-day equivalent of Eddie Haskell hears his father's request, smiles, shoots his father a thumbs up sign and says "sure thing Daddy-o! I'm going to make it my a-number one priority. Help out around the house! Roger-wilco!" The father leaves.

But come noon, *neither* of the two boys have left their spots on the couch. It's then when the first boy, the one who'd told his dad no, remembers his dad's request. It works on him a bit. Maybe the "No brother" recalls all the times his dad's been there for him, coaching his sports teams, buying him ice cream. Maybe the no brother just realizes it's the right thing to do. For whatever reason, the no brother rises up from his spot on the couch, leaving behind his tail print in the cushy green sofa. He walks into the kitchen and begins washing the dishes. The other boy, the yes brother, the one who'd promised his father he'd go and work, *keeps on watching television*. The ball game is coming on and when it's done, he'll need to make some phone calls to his friends. The day is his to do with as he pleases after all. Sure, he's told his dad that he'll work around the house but he figures his dad will understand. Maybe his father will be a bit miffed but he'll forgive him. Heck, by tomorrow, it'll all be long-since forgotten. He keeps on watching T.V.

My dad noted once as we talked about this passage that this yes brother has all the makings of a really outstanding politician – long on promises, short on delivery. Kidding aside – which one of these two brothers did the will of their father? The no brother or the yes brother?

Well, it's obvious, isn't it? The no brother did. In spite of what he told his dad, he ended up doing what his father commanded. The yes brother, who at 8:00am appeared to be the genuine article, turned out to be quite the opposite. Even though he'd said yes, his behavior answered otherwise.

Sometimes we all say yes to things only to find ourselves not following through. And in this parable, we see something clearly. There are definitely times and occasions when our "yesses mean absolutely nothing." If a yes or a declaration of our mouths isn't somehow in alignment with how we behave the fact of the matter is that our words meant absolutely nothing.

In my life, I've known people who were vocally passionate about politics who never once voted. I've known people who claimed to be against violence and yet were only too anxious to tell me about the latest horror movie they saw. I've seen myself decry injustice in the world only to be unjust at points throughout my life in my own dealings with others. Which matters? The appearance or the reality. The words or the actions?

At some point, faithfulness in American Christendom became more about our acceptance of a set of beliefs than it is about an active life of discipleship. I don't know how or when it happened, but it happened and the church of Jesus Christ is all the worse for it. We began to believe that saying YES to Jesus was the end all, be all of our faith life.

With that one question asked and answered that we could glide through into the Kingdom of God. Perhaps we even come to church thinking that in this one hour, we're doing everything necessary for our faith lives. We confess our sin, profess the creed, listen to the sermon and pray. We walk out the door at noon, proud to call ourselves Christian. But from Sunday noon to Sunday at 11:00am the following week, perhaps we do little in the way of acting upon our Christian faith. We spend, on

average 40 hours at work. Then we've got family obligations, other responsibilities and recreation time. So, we don't quite have time to help out at the church. We never think to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with *anyone*. In the end, we schedule our faith lives around our normal life instead of realizing that the entirety of our life is claimed by a righteous and loving God who has summoned us out into the vineyard, laborers for the harvest.

According to a *Newsweek* poll, when asked, "When do you feel the strongest connection to God?" 40% said "praying alone", 21% responded "out in nature", 21% "in a worship service, 6%—when praying with others, 2%—when reading a Bible. All fine answers. What's so amazing is that they didn't even have a category for acting on your faith. But it makes sense, because I'm afraid we've come to believe that Christianity is something we think instead of something we do."

The New Testament puts that perspective in great question. It indicates over and over again that faithfulness is a lived-out response to God's freely given grace. And believe me, people notice how we act and behave.

In the novel *Out of Africa*, a young boy named Kitau comes and asks to work for an Englishwoman living in Africa. She agrees and the young man turns out to be an exemplary servant. After three months though, he approaches her again, this time asking for a letter of reference to work in another household. A Muslim household. The woman is shocked and desirous to keep him. She begs him to stay, offers to raise his salary. Kitau replies that he determined three months prior to either become a Muslim or a Christian. So, he lived three months with her and now he would live three months with a Muslim to see whose behavior was kinder and more just. From that, he would decide which religion to join. Aghast, the woman wrote "I believe that even an Archbishop, when he had the facts laid out before him, would have said or at least thought, "Good God Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here."

You see, people don't judge us Christians on what we say, they judge us on how we live and it seems from this parable and the entirety of the Bible, so too does Jesus. Faith is more than yeses which mean nothing. Faith means action. Service to others, fighting for justice, sharing the gospel.

If we take justified by faith through grace to simply mean we check the right boxes on a church doctrine quiz but then can subsequently remain disengaged in the active work of Jesus Christ, we're sorely mistaken. In following that path, we're no better than the second son offered his father what turned out to be a meaningless yes.

Matthew's Gospel perhaps puts a sharper point on it than another of the other Gospels. After all, it's in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus tells a group of people that He'll not recognize everyone who says "Lord, Lord" in the Kingdom of heaven. Only those who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, respond to His requests will be acknowledged.

Brent Younger puts it this way "Churches are often long on words and short on deeds, spending more time discussing church matters than being the church, assuming that knowing what it means to be a Christian is the same as living as a Christian, understanding everything about faith except that it's supposed to be practiced. It is easy to get beliefs mixed up with actions. Churches are tempted to talk about the poor and never share what they have; to agree on the importance of Christ, but never tell anyone outside the building; to applaud our knowledge and ignore what we fail to do."

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "There's no shortage of people who say, believe, or stand for all the right things. There have always been plenty of those in the world. What God is short of are people who will go where God calls them and do what God gives them to do."

Soren Kirkegaard puts it even more succinctly – "Jesus wants followers, not admirers."

Which one are we? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.