

September 25, 2005  
Psalm 100, Exodus 17:1-7, Matthew 21:23-32  
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### "The Importance of Changing Your Mind"

I don't know about you, but I don't find it at all easy to change my mind. For all of my claims to be open-minded, I find I have set notions of the way things work. I fall pretty easily into the trap of labeling people and groups, limiting my expectations about what new things are possible and resorting to familiar ways of thinking and acting shaped by years of experience.

If I had left Egypt with Moses for the Promised Land only to find myself hungry and thirsty in the wilderness, would I have grumbled and complained? I suspect I would have questioned Moses' leadership and the wisdom of leaving Egypt to die in the wilderness. Maybe Moses got it wrong. Surely, God didn't bring us out here to die. I suspect that I, too, would have murmured against Moses and questioned his authority.

I wonder - if I had seen Jesus in the flesh, heard him teach and watched him heal, would I have been as suspicious as the priests and elders of the people? The chief priests and the leaders of the Jewish people are the ones who ought to welcome Jesus with noisy shouts of joyful praise. They ought to be singing the Psalms! "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise!" They cannot sing. They can only mutter words of threat into their beards. They have made up their minds that he is a dangerous character, a troublemaker and a threat to the status quo.

They have a stake in maintaining the status quo. They know what is right and what is wrong. They are not interested in anything or anyone who is going to upset the apple cart of established patterns of life and faith.

Even though the Jews live under the yoke of Rome, God has carved out a small but workable space for the leaders of the Jewish people to exercise their authority. Now, here comes Jesus, teaching, healing and preaching with authority. Any new authority is a threat to the old. They are convinced beyond a shadow of doubt that their authority comes from God. They are not about to change their minds.

So, they put Jesus to the test by asking him about the sources of his authority. Jesus answers the question with a question of his own. He asks, "Who gave John the authority to baptize?" The reasoning process of the religious leaders exposes their own crafty logic. If they say that God gave John the authority to baptize, then Jesus will wonder why they didn't follow him. If they say from some human authority, they will lose their credibility with the people. They do not seek the truth; they seek their own good. They know how to stay on top by watching the polls and taking the pulse of the nation. Self-service parades as righteousness. Power cloaks itself in religion. Faith becomes something calculating, small minded and pragmatic.

Jesus tells a parable to expose their hypocrisy. The leaders of the Jewish people are like the son who tells the father that he will work in the vineyard but never goes to work. Jesus says to the religious establishment, "Tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead

of you." There is nothing more disheartening than a narrow faith that cannot find joy in the new things that God is doing. Of all the stories of Jesus, this parable is one of the saddest. It is about those who refuse to change their minds and miss the joy of following Jesus. The very people who ought to be able to see what God is doing in Jesus Christ are the very ones who have closed their hearts to the new work of God.

How easy it is to think we are serving God when all we are giving is lip service to God. We become complacent in our faith; we stand on our traditions; we refuse to accept fresh ideas; we close our eyes to the new things God is doing among us and in our world. We think we know all there is to know about what it means to follow Jesus. We are comfortable with our level of giving, our way of serving and our fixed ideas. I have told some of you about the elder in the first church I served who told me with great pride that he hadn't changed his mind once in forty years. I knew that we were in for a bumpy ride. The Rev. Gracia Grindal comments, "This story is good news for all the sinners I know, but horrible news for me as a member of the religious establishment ... I'm a defender of the establishment, no matter how rotten I think it is ... Our piety and our prejudices blur our vision." (The Christian Century, p. 20, Sept 11-24, 2002. "Living by the Word") It is a parable that catches all of us "good church-going" Christians in its web. We treasure our traditions. Tradition alone can be a problem.

The New Testament scholar, Douglas Hare, has written, "How easily 'church work' degenerates into little more than simply maintaining the institution, with no excitement concerning what God's active grace is doing and consequently no enthusiasm for evangelism and renewal." (Interpretation Commentary on Matthew, p. 248) We can become so focused on our traditions that they become the like dead weights around our ankles that keep us from moving forward into the future God has planned for us. I remember a conversation I had many years ago with a Pastoral Nominating Committee that was looking for a pastor to help them increase their witness and mission. The members of the committee were especially proud of their beautiful new sanctuary and large educational building. We talked about how the congregation could use the building to host outside service ministries, support groups and maybe even consider having an after-school program for latch-key children. Some of the committee members began to shift uncomfortably in their chairs when we talked about how heavy use of the building would mean increasing wear and tear and maintenance costs. After that conversation, I never heard from the committee again.

Of all the stories about Jesus, this is one of the most joyful. The people who turn their lives around and follow Jesus are like the son who says he will not go to work, but changes his heart and goes to labor in the vineyard. They see the new thing God is doing. It tells us that every day is full of fresh possibilities for faith and life. It tells us that God is at work today. God is always moving somebody to strike a rock out in some wilderness to give water to thirsty souls. The kingdom is in our midst. All we have to do is open our eyes and follow Jesus.

It is a happy story because it is about prejudiced people who have seen the light, scam artists who have come clean, outcasts who have found a home in the church, and ordinary people like you and me who have begun to live extraordinary lives as followers of Jesus. It is about joining the conversation to dream and to envision our future as a congregation. It is about folks, who never thought of leaving the comforts of home, going on a mission trip to Africa. It is about people who, as the Psalmist says, "serve the Lord with gladness and enter God's courts with thanksgiving."

The new thing begins with you and me. To paraphrase Dr. Grindal, "It isn't what we say that counts. It is what we do." We need to ask ourselves some hard questions about the way we live as disciples of Jesus Christ. I suspect that not all of us are at peace with our neighbors, thinking good thoughts about our enemies, or satisfied with our relationships with our families. I suspect some of us are not at ease with how we spend our time, use our talents and give our money. We are troubled that we tip God by tossing a few coins in a jar at a cash register marked "Hurricane Relief" instead of tithing to God from the best of our resources. I doubt if we are satisfied with our spiritual life, with our limited understanding of the Bible, or with the way we squander our abilities doing things that we don't really value. I suspect that some of us feel like we are whistling in the dark when we try to apply our faith to our business practices, social attitudes, and our personal moral lives.

To follow Jesus is to find the center of life in the worship of God and in loving community with others. When we follow Jesus we live by the grace of God and we extend that grace to others. To follow Jesus is to live a life that is generous and caring to a fault, sharing our resources sacrificially and giving joyfully of ourselves for others as Christ has given to us. If the words of Jesus do not trouble us, then we may find ourselves on the wrong side of the parable. We don't need much help convincing ourselves we are right to remain angry at someone who hurt us years ago or at some foolish thing the church did forty years ago. We do need God's help to let go of past wounds or outdated notions that keep us from living a joyful and abundant life today.

Remember that the words of Jesus may be bad news to the comfortable, but they are good news to the troubled. It is those whose hearts are troubled by the gap between what they say and what they do who have hope. These words are good news to those who now want to change their minds.

I have often thought about the lives of two leaders in the Presbyterian Church whose witness and teaching have influenced my life. Both of these leaders were men of courage and conviction. Both of them served the church well as pastors and scholars. In the later years of life, one of them seemed to get stuck in time. By holding fast to the faith, he refused to see what new things the God he worshipped and served could be doing. The other man also held fast to the faith, but he was open to discern and embrace the work of God's Spirit in new situations. One looked back; the other looked forward. One became bitter; the other remained full of joy. They taught me many things.

Most of all they taught me the importance of discerning the work of God and being willing to change your mind. Jesus is telling us about the importance of changing our minds. Sometimes we need to face those situations, problems and people that make us most uncomfortable. We need to see them through the eyes of Jesus. Maybe God is at work in them in ways that we have not yet seen.

My grandmother was born in the late 1890's in a small town in South Carolina. When I was a child she would tell me stories about her uncles fighting in Lee's Army of Virginia in the Civil War. Over the course of her long life, she saw a lot of social, political, scientific and technological change. The Civil Rights Movement was at first hard for her to understand and accept. For over seventy years, she was a member of a large, totally white, historic church in my hometown. It became known that African-Americans were attending the church and were planning to join the church. One very wealthy deacon in the church let it be known that if "those people" were permitted to join the

congregation then he would withhold his very substantial support of the church. I will never forget my grandmother saying, "Well, it's not his church anyway. It is Christ's church. You don't give to God with strings attached. He may as well keep his money." In that moment, I saw how the gospel had changed her mind.

Where is God calling you to change your mind? I suspect it may be just at the point where your certainties and your heart-felt convictions only seem to alienate you from others and do not compel you to build loving community. If we trust that what Jesus says is true, then prejudice can be overcome; cold hearts can thaw; crooked leaders can straighten out; misers can become magnanimous givers; enemies can become friends; and even you and I can enter the kingdom of heaven.