

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm 25:4-9; Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 21:28-32

Our Gospel reading this morning finds us in Jerusalem. Jesus has entered Jerusalem on a donkey with palm branches waving and loud shouts of “Hosannah in the highest.” Jesus also, upon arriving at the temple, drove out the money changers. With these two dramatic events, the chief priests and elders of the people ask Jesus by what authority he did such things. Jesus, knowing they were trying to trap him, asks his own question, “Was John’s baptism from God or man?”

They are in a quandary, if they say it was from God, Jesus will say, “why did you not believe.” If they say it wasn’t, then the people will be stirred up as many believed John the Baptist was a prophet. So, they say to Jesus, “We do not know.” Jesus returns the answer and says, “Neither then will I tell you on what authority I do these things.” However, Jesus does go on to offer a parable, our Gospel for today:

"What is your opinion?

A man had two sons.

He came to the first and said,

'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.'

He said in reply, 'I will not,'

but afterwards changed his mind and went.

The man came to the other son and gave the same order.

He said in reply, 'Yes, sir, 'but did not go.

Which of the two did his father's will?"

They answered, "The first."

Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you,

tax collectors and prostitutes

are entering the kingdom of God before you.

When John came to you in the way of righteousness,

you did not believe him;

but tax collectors and prostitutes did.

Yet even when you saw that,

you did not later change your minds and believe him."

This parable is only found in Matthew’s gospel and highlights the relationship between what we hear and what we do. Both sons hear the father’s command to go work in the vineyard, but only the first son responds with action.

This calls to mind the intimate relationship between hearing and doing, or hearing and obeying.

I imagine all of us at some point in our lives have heard the statement, “Actions speak louder than words.” Whether from a parent, teacher, coach or family member these words have been addressed to us to highlight the importance of our actions. What we do matters.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus’ teachings are meant to be heard and acted upon. Faith is revealed in action. The beginning and conclusion of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew’s Gospel solidifies the connection of hearing

and doing. At the end of Jesus' sermon on the mount in Matthew chapter 7 Jesus says, "Whoever **hears** these words of mine **and acts on them** is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. After the storms came, the house did not fall because it was built on a rock. But whoever **hears** these words of mine **and does not act upon them** is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. When the floods and storms came, the house fell hard. Faith is both a hearing and a doing of the will of God. In faith, we cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work in our lives.

In addition, Jesus' final teaching in Matthew chapter 25 also emphasizes the vital role of actions in our faith. After giving the analogy of separating sheep from the goats, those on his right say, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink, or naked and clothe you? Jesus said, whenever you **did it to the least of these you did it to me.**" To those on his left he said, "whenever you **did not do it to the least of these you did not do it to me.**"

The Hebrew leaders who addressed Jesus and tried to trap him were well aware of the dynamic relationship between hearing and doing – between hearing and obeying. In fact, in ancient Hebrew there was only one word, "shema" (שמע) that meant both "to hear" and "to obey." Thus, to truly hear was to obey.

"Shema" is the name of a prayer said by all faithful Jews twice a day. Again, the Hebrew word for "hear" is Shema. It is the first word of the Shema prayer. "Hear, O Israel the Lord your God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength..." The Hebrew leaders understood Shema yet, for various reasons many could not "hear" the truth of God in John the Baptist or Jesus. They didn't obey in faith, even after they witnessed the conversion and transformation of tax collectors and sinners.

In the parable of the two sons both sons listen to the command of their father to work in the vineyard but only one, in a Hebrew sense, truly heard the father. Only one obeyed. Only one had the humility to change his mind and do what the father asked. Only one honored the father with his faith in action.

While Jesus is clearly associating the Jewish leaders with the second son who did not do the will of the father, I wonder what the parable has to teach us?

Like the Hebrew word "Shema", our lives are to reflect a true hearing and doing of the word and will of God. In addition, if the first son is an example of doing the father's will, then we too are called to humility. We might ask ourselves: Where do we need to humble ourselves and return to the Father's vineyard? Where are we being called to a change of heart or a change of mind in order to deepen our trust and faith in God's will and work in our lives? What do we need to truly "Hear"?

The intimate relationship of hearing and doing the will of God necessitates humility. To hear and obey God's will is an act of humility.

This truth is revealed in our second reading in Philippians. Paul challenges the Philippians and you and I to do nothing from selfish ambition but to regard others as more important than ourselves. Paul encourages us to have the very mind of Jesus who did not think equality with God was something to be grasped, but emptying and humbling himself he became a servant to the point of death, even death on a cross. "Therefore, God has highly exalted him and given him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father."

Since humility was a hallmark of Jesus' hearing and doing, it must be our way of hearing and doing as well. True hearing necessitates humble acts of faith, service and love.

In this season of COVID, racial unrest, political confusion and division, economic stress, and uncertainties too numerous to name, we are invited to hear God say to us what the father said to his two sons, "Go work in my vineyard."

May our lives become a humble "Shema" prayer in which we hear and obey. There is so much work to be done in the vineyard of God's Kingdom. We need the courage to humble ourselves. We need the courage to trust God. We need the courage to share the love of God with others. We need humble courage to live our lives so that others might truly hear and respond to God's love.

Like the first son in the parable, do we have the humble courage to change our minds? Do we have the humble courage to change our minds about our hesitations, our fears, our pride. Do we have the humble courage to change our minds about God's mercy, that our sins truly are forgiven. Do we trust the authority and character of God? Maybe we need the humble courage to change our minds about ourselves. To trust we are loved beyond measure and wanted.

With courageous and humble hearts, may we, by God's grace, say YES to the Father's great invitation to go work in the Lord's vineyard.

In a time such as this, marked by so much division, it is interesting to note that Paul calls the Philippians not only to humility but also to unity. Paul encourages the Philippians to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Jesus' final prayer for his disciples in the book of John (chapter 17) is also a prayer for unity. Jesus prays, "May they all be one as you and I are one so that the world may believe." In answer Paul's encouragement and Jesus' prayer, may we seek unity so that more and more people might come to know the saving love and mercy of God.

There are so many voices calling for our attention. So many sounds drowning out the still small voice of God's unconditional love. With humble courage may we be truly open to God's pardon and mercy and go into the vineyard helping others hear God's loving voice and invitation.

May we unite our hearts and voices crying out in the wilderness and chaos of this time that there is a God of love and forgiveness. There is a God who calls us to work in his Kingdom and to live for his purposes and glory.

May our lives and actions join the chorus proclaiming God's limitless love and faithfulness and may we truly hear and act on that love with faith in our Lord, Jesus Christ, simply doing the next loving thing.

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

God bless you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Steve

