

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 1, 2023
 “Yes, Father, I’ll Go” (Matthew 21:23-32)

In our gospel text for this morning, we see Jesus, once again, go head to head with the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus was teaching in the temple one day. Upon seeing this, the chief priests and elders were appalled. Teaching was their job! How dare this common thug – one who hung out with tax collectors and prostitutes – try to undermine their authority this way. He was nothing but a blasphemer, yet he had gained much popularity with the people. They had to stop him; had to uncover him for what he really was and turn the crowds against him. Otherwise, the whole Jewish religious system would be threatened. And they certainly could not allow that to happen.

So, they quickly put together a plan. They would simply ask him a two-part question then stand back while he incriminated himself. *By what authority are you doing these things, they asked, and who gave you this authority?*

It was an obvious trap and Jesus recognized that, no matter how he answered it, he would have been in trouble. If he said he did this on his own authority, they would dismiss all that he did and charge him with blasphemy against God. If he said that he was acting on God’s authority, they would accuse him of disrupting the religious order and acting counter to God’s divine will. Again, they would charge him with blasphemy. The religious leaders thought they had Jesus where they wanted him, but in good rabbinic fashion, he countered with a question of his own: *Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?*

Now it was they who were caught by surprise. Not knowing how to answer, they began to argue among themselves. *If we say ‘from heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ If we say that John’s authority came from human origin, we might cause a riot because many in the crowd believe that John was a prophet sent from God.* So they simply answered, *We do not know.* What they were really saying was, *We don’t want to know; we’ve got things under control here, Jesus, so please go away.* But Jesus did not (and would not) go away. Instead, he told a parable to show the religious leaders what kind of men they really were.

A father had two sons. He went to the first and told him to go work in the vineyard. That son was out and out disobedient, and flatly refused. Later, he repented and had a change of heart. Sorry that he had been disobedient toward his father, he went to work in the vineyard. The father also went to the second son and told him to go work in the vineyard, as well. The second son was outwardly dutiful. Wanting to please his father, he quickly agreed, *Yes Father, I’ll go.* But he, too, had a change of heart and didn’t go to the vineyard.

Which of the two sons, Jesus asked, obeyed his father? The religious leaders correctly answered that the first one did. That’s when Jesus confronted them with the news that the tax collectors and prostitutes – those they considered religious outcasts and misfits – would enter the kingdom of heaven before them. Why? Because the sinners, upon hearing John’s message, had repented. They had turned from their sin and turned to God. They had embraced good over evil. As a result, they had received God’s full grace and forgiveness. But the religious leaders, who had

also heard John's message, thought they had no need of God's forgiveness. So they rejected both John and his message of God's grace and forgiveness.

These men were the leaders of the synagogue. They were the ones who had been called and ordained by God by virtue of the family into which they had been born. They were the ones commissioned to lead the people in the ways of God. They had answered that call. *Yes, Father, I'll go.* For all intents and purposes, they were like the first son. They had all the appearance of righteousness. They said the right things; they acted in conformity to the law, but they had not made God the Lord of their lives.

They were more devoted to the system than they were to God. They were more interested in how they appeared before others than in the purity of their hearts. They were concerned more with the law, which they could use to bring judgment upon the people, than they were in a relationship with God. Because of their status, they thought themselves important and pious, even though their actions didn't follow their words. And they refused to see God at work even when he stood there in front of them. Jesus made it clear that they were, in fact, more like the second son. They said the right words, but their actions revealed the true state of their hearts.

As we can imagine, Jesus' words were not well received by the religious leaders. They heard his parable. They heard the truth in it, but rather than change, they conspired with the Romans to put him to death.

What about us? How will we respond to this parable? The majority of us would be inclined to align ourselves with the first son. We stand ready to go into the vineyard when Christ calls. With our confirmation vows, we have pledged to make Christ the Lord of our lives. *Yes, Father, I'll go.* Or we've taken vows of church membership to uphold the church with our prayers, our attendance, our gifts, and our service. *Yes, Father, I'll go.* We are those who have said that we would go, and that's a very good thing. But the question is: Have we gone?

Writer Elizabeth Sherrill tells of visiting the ice skating rink at Rockefeller Center in New York. Dozens of people skated around the rink. But in the center of the rink was a lovely blond woman in an attractive skater's outfit. The woman was stretching and posing, stretching and posing. Elizabeth waited expectantly for this young woman to finish with her posing and begin skating, but she never did. On other visits to the rink, Elizabeth again saw this woman. She was always dressed like a professional, but, not once, did she take a turn around the rink. She was all appearance and no substance.

Does this hit close to home for us? We look like followers of Jesus. We come to church, read the Bible and spend time in prayer. We can recite the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and a number of Bible verses. We appear to be good and righteous people because we speak the language of the church, but is it only stretching and posing, stretching and posing?

Yes, Father, I'll go, we have declared. But have we really gone? Have we made Jesus the Lord of our lives? Have we professed him as Lord with more than our lips? Have our actions demonstrated our desire to make Christ known in our families, in our church, in our community? Have we done something to take the love of Christ into the world? Loved our neighbor?

Forgiven those who sin against us? Fed the hungry? Visited the sick? Clothed the naked? Served in the ministries of our church and community?

Have we tried to have a positive Christian influence to those around us? Have we displayed honesty, avoided gossip and criticism of others, been slow to judge, befriended the friendless, encouraged the hopeless, comforted the sorrowful? Have we let Christ shine through us and made a difference in the lives of others? You and I have the opportunity each and every day to make a difference in the life of someone else. And if we've made Jesus the Lord of our lives, there is no limit to what we can do.

Years ago, William Tarbell used this analogy. He explained that light traveled 186,000 miles per second. If that's too hard to imagine, he suggested that we look up into the night sky and pick out one star. The light coming from that star, he said, left the star about the time Shakespeare was writing his plays. The light has been traveling all that time to reach you and provide its light.

Next, he said: The work of the first disciples still influences you. Centuries ago, men and women were commissioned to make disciples of all nations. Although they have been dead for 2,000 years, the effect of their work has traveled through history and touched us. That influence is felt in our lives and churches today.

Think about it. A handful of people 2,000 years ago turned the world upside down. Is it because they were brilliant? There's no indication of that. Is it because they were powerful? We know that wasn't the case. They were a motley crew of people on the bottom of the social structure of their day. Most of them were Galileans – hillbillies – as far as their neighbors were concerned. So, how did they make such an impact on the world? It was because they were totally dedicated to Christ. *Yes, I'll go.* You see, there is no limit to what we can do in this world if Jesus truly is our Lord. If we are willing to go into the vineyard, God will help us go there.

Yes, Father, I'll go. We've all said it, but have we gone? Is Christ the Lord of our lives? Are we having an impact on those around us?

Father Mychal F Judge was a New York Fire Department chaplain who was killed by falling debris from the Twin Towers in the 9/11 terrorist attack. In Father Mychal's pocket that tragic Tuesday was this prayer he always carried with him:

*Lord, take me where you want me to go
Let me meet who you want me to meet
Tell me what you want me to say
And keep me out of your way.*

Father Mychal was a man of commitment. He understood that the vows he took before God were not trivial. He was one who said, *Yes, Father, I'll go*, and went. May each of us do the same. Amen.