

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 21:23–32

AND THE TWO CHILDREN SAID...

One child says, “No” with his words and the other child says, “No” with his actions. Which child did the will of the father? This is the question Jesus asks those who had come to him, not in sincerity, but they had come to him seeking to undermine what he was saying to the crowd. They gave the obvious answer when Jesus asked them which child followed the will of his father. Notice how they have to have a webinar about the first question, right?—so they get the right, safe answer. They have to consult one another and double-check to make sure nobody speaks out of turn. “We don’t know,” is always a good response.

I was at the Solar Decathlon this week, and I was most impressed with the students who were asked questions and they said, “I don’t know, but I know who does know,” and they would direct you over to someone else. At least “we don’t know” describes where they are spiritually. They are lost. But here, when Jesus tells the parable, their answer also indicates that they haven’t a clue what he is talking about.

Many of you have read a book entitled Bread for the Journey by Henri Nouwen. In that book, Nouwen says that authority and obedience can never be separated. You cannot exercise authority unless you are also obedient, and you cannot be obedient ultimately unless you recognize an authority over yourself.

So, Jesus is approached and questioned about his authority. He wants to know if they understand just how far-reaching his authority goes in this life. But they don’t have a clue, because they have long since given up on seeking to be obedient. They are only interested in winning arguments. They have given up that intangible connection that is so essential between exercising authority in a spirit of obedience. One without the other doesn’t work. It doesn’t work for leadership. It doesn’t work in parenting. And it certainly doesn’t work in discipleship. If we disengage from obedience, our authority becomes hollow.

I really hope we can understand this passage—this story that is unfolding in Matthew. But the only way to do that is to look back at the first time Jesus goes into the temple. He has just entered Jerusalem as if he is a triumphant hero. People are laying down their cloaks for him and their palm branches. They are singing his praises. He arrives in town and the first thing he does is go to the temple. But what happens on that first visit? He walks in and sees the worship experience in complete disarray. There are money changers and dove sellers. There is a thriving enterprise, but there is not much worship happening. And he overturns their tables and ushers them out of his Father’s house.

This makes the ones who issued all those permits to the money changers and the dove sellers very angry. And they decide then and there something has to be done about this disruptive savior. Now he comes back to the temple where he has healed the sick. And he has heard the children sing his praises. Again he is teaching, listening, understanding. And he sees very quickly that there is still a lack of obedience in the priests and the elders of what is to become his church. There is so much resentment, so much intent on destroying his ministry that no one trusts anyone.

Wouldn't it have been different if John the Baptist, the elders and the priests, and Jesus could have all seen one another as all being on the same team, pulling in the same direction? Why couldn't they see the obvious leading of God's Anointed? I think it's the same reason we struggle today, for it doesn't matter if it's first century Jerusalem or new-era churches. It doesn't even matter if it's just a family gathering. There has to be a yearning for obedience. Everyone in this room wants for the children that are gathered here today—on this special Day School Sunday—to be able to dream dreams and pursue those dreams. We want them to be well-rounded. We want them to be involved and interested in learning. We want them to be interesting themselves. But the fact is, our children come to us very differently even within the same family. And none of the children come with instruction manuals. They are all unique. And my wife would say, "They all learn, just a little bit differently."

Jesus wants us to understand how willing he is to meet us where we are. That first son still makes the grade. He still understands eventually the meaning of obedience and of his Father's authority. Despite the mistakes of the past, despite his reluctance, despite his rebellion, he finds a way back. It did mean back-tracking on some of what he had declared emphatically. It did mean starting over for him so that he could live up to his Father's confidence, but it happened. And really this is what we want to see happen in our children too. We want them to gain the lesson that comes from our faith in them, our love for them, a love which has no ending, a love which God says cannot be thwarted. Clearly, if we take a path of looking at our children or one another and we are overly judgmental, there is not much chance. We will end up like the priests and the elders. If we feel that God is too demanding, we are not likely to be interested in going where God is leading.

But this is where our story is good news—good news for everyone in this room who has doubts, everyone who wonders if they really have the ability to live up to God's confidence in them. This is good news to the hesitant, to those who made poor choices in the past. This is good news from a God who invites us to become obedient children and is patient as we change our minds. The only thing that can keep us from responding to such a God is settling where we are, self-satisfied and justifying where we stopped. In fact if that's where we are, if we see salvation as an event that is over and done with, and we are just waiting for the consummation of history, we probably don't like this story at all. We certainly don't get its meaning.

But there is an essence of the Gospel here that is irresistible. If your children are convinced that you will never turn against them; that no matter what, you will be there for

them, and if they know you give them permission to start over as many times as it takes, then we all have the hope of doing the will of the Father. The secret is believing that's how God feels about us—God has the time and the inclination to let us start again and again, and that God welcomes us home. God encourages us, no matter what, to follow His authority, to follow the path of a child who once said, “No,” but changed his mind and gave everything the same way Jesus did for us.

So if you have been reluctant, hesitant, filled with doubt, let this time of offering with the wonderful music of our choir, let this be an invitation where you hear God calling you home, believing in you beyond what you have been able to believe in yourself. So let us worship the Lord. Amen.