

The phrase “we, running to obtain your promises” from the collect today, instantly took me back to my childhood in central Maine. Mr. Bullen made his living by delivering groceries to homes (obviously he was ahead of his time). Whenever we saw his black van come up the street, we would run for it because Mr. Bullen showered us with penny candy.

I wonder what it would be like if we ran here this morning to receive the gifts that God desires to lavish upon us? Do we come with such expectancy to receive heavenly treasure, the fullness of grace?

As we turn our attention to the gospel, we may realize that there is a lot we do not know about this parable. We don't know if this behavior was typical of the sons or extraordinary. We don't know what interaction or conversation the sons may have had with each other (or with their father) after their initial response. We don't know what may have prevented (or enticed) either of the sons to act conversely to their earlier statements. And we don't even know exactly why Jesus told this parable.

So what do we know? Well, we know that the son who said he'd show up and work did not and the son who at first refused changed his mind and did. We also know that most of those listening would probably agree with the maxim that “actions speak louder than words” and believe that the first son, despite his abrupt refusal of his father's command is the one who “did the will of his father.” And we know that Jesus links this parable to the response of the tax collectors and prostitutes to the good news of the coming kingdom.

A lot of what we don't know has to do with motivation and circumstances, and this is true not only of our interaction with these characters in the text but also of our regular interactions with each other. We don't know what motivates many to come or to not come to church. We don't know what motivates one person to give so generously and another who could easily (as far as we can tell) do the same, yet doesn't. We don't know why one seems so predictably contrary while someone else is so unfailingly gracious.

We simply don't know these things. We may guess; we may make assumptions and judgments, but ultimately we don't know. And that should introduce a hint of caution, even humility, in our judgments about these characters *and* one another.

The general assumption about this parable is that it highlights the mounting tension between Jesus and the religious authorities and to builds the case against those leaders for their failure to answer Jesus' question about John's authority and ultimately their failure to recognize in Jesus' as God's promised Messiah. I wonder if this parable doesn't also offer a word of surprise and hope?

I hear in this parable the surprising possibility of hope that someone who has refused to listen to God may yet change his/her mind. Hope that it's never too late to respond to the grace of the Gospel. Hope that one's past actions or current status do not determine one's future. Hope that even those whom good people (like the chief priests or vestry members) have decided are beyond the pale of decent society are never, ever beyond the reach of God.

No matter what may have happened in the past, God is eager to meet us in the present and offer us an open future. It is not too late. (Think of the father in the story of the Prodigal Son who, filled with joy, rushes down the road to embrace his estranged son). God is here, inviting each of us into the kingdom that not only lives out in front of us but has the capacity to shape our every moment from this moment forward. This is something, I think, of what Paul Tillich meant with his phrase “the eternal now.” Each moment is pregnant with the possibility of receiving God’s grace, repenting of things we’ve done or were done to us, returning to right relationship with God and those around us, and receiving the future as open rather than determined.

God’s promise about an open future shapes our present here and now. I wonder what things do we hold onto that make it difficult to believe and accept God’s forgiveness or to imagine that the future can be different than the past? Look around this morning. There are people here who vote differently than you might. There are people who are optimistic about the future and those who are frightened, people who feel great about their church and those who are full of doubts. We don’t know one another’s motivations or experiences, but we do know that God is reaching out to each one of us with the gift of acceptance and love and forgiveness that are the hallmarks of the kingdom Jesus proclaims.

We live at time of such division. Can we remind ourselves that beneath all of our differences is a profound commonality in that we are each a child of God whom God loves, adores, and is speaking to right here and now.

John Westerhoff, an educator in the Episcopal Church, describes a workshop on Baptism that he was conducting with children. He reminded them that chrism, the oil scented with balsam, is used to make that indelible sign of the cross on the forehead. (And chrism is where we get the word “christening” from). In addition, oil is used to anoint kings and queens: The Archbishop of Canterbury anointed Charles just as Samuel anointed David. Dr. Westerhoff said, “the chrism reminds us of who we are; we are no less than princesses and princes in God’s kingdom. The participants made elaborate paper crowns and proceeded to have a parade across the seminary close. As they went, he said, “imagine a host of angels going before you, shouting your name ‘Make way for Sally, a princess in the kingdom of God!’”

Knowing and owning our true identity changes everything. And being reminded of that let us take a little more time to listen to each other, try to understand each other, and to listen for God’s calling for ourselves and our community together. That’s my hope for this interim time together.

God is present, reaching out to us in the eternal now of God’s grace, love, and acceptance to call us to hope-filled and purposeful lives of service to our neighbor, but will we recognize it? That, I think, is the question today, as God invites us once again to see, accept, make real, and respond to God’s amazing grace and live into the preferred and promised future that God has prepared for us. And that my friends is something worth running toward.

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