

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ezekiel 18:25-28
<i>Response</i>	Remember your mercies, O Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 2:1-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	My sheep hear my voice, says the Lord; I know them, and they follow me.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 21:28-32

The 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A continues our journey through the Gospel of Matthew by moving to yet another of Jesus's unique parables for this Gospel. Sometimes this will be called the story of the two sons, sometimes it is called the parable of two sons — I am going to refer to it as a parable because I do think it is a kind of a riddle, it's a story that has a question embedded in it. It can be found in Matthew 21:28-32. It is a short gospel for this week, but it is very important. It says this...Jesus said:

"What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, so what do we make of this particular parable? Although it is brief, there are several points that need to be made. First and foremost, the context. If you go back up to Matthew 21:23, it's very clear that when Jesus says these words he's in the Temple, and he is speaking to “the chief priests and the elders of the people.” So the context of that parable is him addressing the leadership within Jerusalem, and that context is very important for the meaning of the parable. When we turn to the parable itself, we see that the story revolves around two sons of a vineyard owner. When the vineyard owner commands his sons to go into the vineyard, they have different responses. The first son, his first response, is that he will not, it's one of disobedience, and yet he repents. He changes his mind, and it says that afterwards he did in fact go into the vineyard and work the vineyard. The Greek word there — although some translations will say he repented — the Greek word there *metamelomai* literally means he changed his mind. So he had a change of heart or a change of mind, and then he goes into the field and carries out his father's wishes.

The second son, however, gives a first response of apparent obedience. He says “I go, sir,” but his actions don't follow his words. And so although he speaks a word of obedience, he actually disobeys and doesn't go into the vineyard and doesn't work the fields. So Jesus asks a real simple question, which of the two did the will of his father? And the answer is obvious there, it's the one who actually went into the fields and worked the fields. So why does Jesus asked such a seemingly obvious parable? Why does he present to them such a seemingly obvious riddle? Well the answer is simple. It is that the primary meaning of this particular parable is the application to Jesus' audience.

So this is one of those parables where it's very clear that the meaning is determined, above all, by his first century Jewish context, and by the immediate context of who he is speaking to in this particular parable. And if you recall, the context is that he's speaking to the chief priests and the elders who had rejected John the Baptist as being an authentic prophet sent from God. So Jesus immediately applies the parable to them by saying John came to you — meaning

John came to you chief priests and you elders in the way of righteousness — but you didn't believe him; but the tax collectors and the harlots, the prostitutes, believed him. And even when you saw them converting and repenting and changing their ways, you did not afterward repent and believe him. So Jesus is applying the parable to them in such a way that he's correlating; the first son correlates with the tax collectors and the prostitutes, whose initial response to John the Baptist — or in this case whose initial response to God — is one of disobedience. They are living lives of sin. They are not following the will of the Lord. They are certainly not working in the vineyard of the Lord. But because of their response to John's message of repentance, they turn from their lives of sin and they begin to live according to the law of God. They begin to cultivate lives of virtue, or in the language of the parable, they go into the vineyard of the Lord and they begin to work in the fields.

The second son is being correlated to the chief priests and the elders, who give lip service to the law of God. They say that they're going to obey but they do not in fact actually repent from their sins. So when John comes to the people of Israel with a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins — think back here to the Gospel of Matthew 3, which describes John the Baptist's ministry as a message of repentance because of the coming of the kingdom and as a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins — when the chief priests and elders encounter John the Baptist, far from repenting, they reject him. They reject the idea that he is a prophet sent from God and they do not repent and they do not turn from their own wickedness. They don't turn from their own sinfulness, so Jesus correlates them with the second son who says he is obedient but does not in fact do the will of his father.

So with that in mind then, the parable there is a great example of how Jesus' parables would often have the role of a kind of prophecy of indictment of his contemporaries. So if you go back to the Old Testament, you see this over and over again. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, one of their primary roles as prophets was to call out the sinful leaders of Israel and to indict them for their sinfulness and to call them to repentance, to change their ways. Well the same thing was true of John the

Baptist, who was a prophet, and the same thing is true now of Jesus of Nazareth, who in addition to being the Messiah, the Savior, the son of God, is also a prophet. He's coming to the people and bringing to them the same message that John brought, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And the irony of that situation is that many of the most gravely sinful people, like the tax collectors and the prostitutes, are open to the message of John and they're open to the message of Jesus, and they repent and they turn from their lives of sin and begin to live lives of virtue, whereas those who you would expect to repent, who you would expect to know the law and therefore respond to the prophets of God, namely the chief priests and the elders — these are basically the equivalent of the biblical scholars, the scribes and the elders — they don't turn away from their sin and they don't listen to the message of God. So that is the basic meaning of this particular parable of the two sons. The main emphasis is the importance of repentance.

Now if you do go back to the Old Testament in Ezekiel 18, you'll see very easily why the Church picks this particular reading for the first reading of the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time. It goes very clearly with the New Testament Gospel. In Ezekiel 18:25-28, we have another quote from another prophet, Ezekiel, who as you may recall from the Old Testament, is a prophet of judgment. He is one of those prophets who was speaking around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem's Temple in 587 B.C., and so he's got a message of judgment for the people. And some of the people are reacting to God's message of coming judgment by accusing the Lord himself of being unfair, accusing the Lord himself of being unjust, and this is how God responds through the prophet Ezekiel. He says this:

"Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die for it; for the iniquity which he has committed he shall die. Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is lawful and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all

the transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die.

Okay, so what's the connection between this passage and the New Testament gospel passage for the day? Well the answer is real simple. It's that God always extends his mercy to those who repent of their sins. And, this is important, he also judges those who used to be righteous but turn from their righteousness to live lives of sin. This is yet one more example from the prophet Ezekiel of how, already in the Old Testament, it is very clear that the God of the Old Testament is not just a God of justice, but a God of mercy. He is a God of compassion. He is a God of steadfast love. He extends mercy to sinners if they repent of their wickedness, if they repent of their ways.

And that of course is the theme of the Responsorial Psalm for the day. So if you look at Psalm 25, the refrain for the Psalm is to “Remember your mercies, O Lord.” It is a kind of a prayer to the Lord. It is a very, very beautiful Psalm. I will just read the first few verses because it is such a beautiful Psalm:

To thee, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in thee I trust,
let me not be put to shame;
let not my enemies exult over me.
Yea, let none that wait for thee be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
Make me to know thy ways, O LORD;
teach me thy paths.
Lead me in thy truth, and teach me,
for thou art the God of my salvation;
for thee I wait all the day long.

And here are the two key verses, verses 6-7:

Be mindful of thy mercy, O LORD, and of thy steadfast love,

for they have been from of old.
Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions;
according to thy steadfast love remember me,
for thy goodness' sake, O LORD!

Okay. There is so much here that's important to emphasize. I hope you're getting the sense, as we work through the Gospel Matthew and these particular Old Testament texts, of how merciful God is. That has really been the theme of several weeks now: the mercy of God, the mercy of God, the mercy of God. And this particular Psalm expresses it in a very beautiful way when the psalmist says in verse seven, “remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions...” but remember your “steadfast love” toward me. What does that mean? Well I think it means here that the psalmist is praying and asking God not to allow his sins from the past to define who he is, especially the sins of his youth. And this is something that I think is easy to fall into. It's very often the case — I can't tell you how many times I have heard people say this— “you know!? I was a cradle Catholic. I was raised in the Church, but then in my teenage years and then in college I went astray. I went off the path. I fell into a life of sin.” And it is easy if that has happened to you, to think that the sins of your youth, or the sins of your past, define you in the eyes of God. That when God looks at you that's all he sees, a sinner who is lost and who is defiled or dirty or anything like that. And what the psalmist is saying here is...he's not saying I'm a good person. I haven't done anything wrong. I never killed anybody. He's not trying to make light of his sins. He is being honest. I have sinned. I have transgressed, but I'm asking God to have mercy on me and to not remember the sins of my youth, but to remember his steadfast love.

The Hebrew word here is *hesed*. It is sometimes translated into Greek as “to remember his mercy.” *Eleos* is the Greek word. That's a really wonderful translation of *hesed*, because it points to the fact that we are asking God to see us through the lens of love, not through the lens of our sinfulness. Not to allow our sins to define us, but to allow God's love, who made us in his image and likeness, to define us. To look at us and to see us as his son or his daughter. To see his

beloved son or his daughter, not our sinful ways, but to see who we are and who he made us to be. I think that that insight from this particular Psalm 25, coupled with Ezekiel's emphasis on the mercy of God, is a beautiful bridge into Jesus' teaching in the parable of the two sons. Because what the parable of the two sons shows us, is that although at first we may turn away from God, although at first we may lead lives of sin, although we may refuse to obey God for a long period of time, he always holds out, so to speak, the hand of mercy to his prodigal sons and his prodigal daughters. There is no sin that we can commit that he can't forgive if we are willing to turn away from it and to embrace that mercy.

You can think here -- it is not in the Gospel of Matthew -- of the Gospel of Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son. How the father goes out and he's watching and he's waiting for his son to return home. Why? Because when he looks at his son, he doesn't see him primarily through the lens of his sin, but through the lens of his identity as a son. He doesn't remember the transgressions of his youth, but he looks upon him with steadfast love. And that's how God looks at us as well. And that is what Jesus is trying to teach the chief priests and the elders in this particular parable. The irony of the fact that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going to enter into the kingdom of God before the chief priests and the elders, not because the tax collectors and the prostitutes have been great people, they have lead lives of sin, but it's because their hearts were open to the mercy of God, and they were willing in humility to turn away from that sin and to do the will of God. Whereas the chief priests and the elders, by contrast, fell into sin precisely because they lacked humility. And although they may have paid lip service to God and to his commandments for some time, they have fallen into sin and they rejected the message and the mission of God that was embodied in the person of John the Baptist.

So it's an irony, it's a hard truth, but it's one that we all need to hear. Namely, there is no sin that you have ever committed that God is not powerful enough to forgive if you turn away from it. And, at the same time, it doesn't matter how many years you've lived a life of obedience and righteousness, you still have to get up today and continue that journey. You can't turn away from that life of righteousness and

fall back into sin and think that the fact that you lived righteously in the past is going to put you in a right relationship with God for the future. No! We always have to walk each day the life of living according to the commandments of the Lord. And that's really what St. Clement of Alexandria said about this particular parable. St. Clement of Alexandria, one of the early Church Fathers, wrote this about the importance of God's mercy and the importance of repentance in the parable of the two sons. It is a beautiful reflection, he says this:

*The doors are open for all who sincerely and wholeheartedly return to God; indeed, the Father is most willing to welcome back a truly repentant son or daughter. The result of true repentance, however, is that you do not fall into the same faults again, but utterly uproot from your souls the sins from which you consider yourself worthy of death. When these have been destroyed God will again dwell within you, since Scripture says that for the Father and his angels in heaven the festal joy and gladness at the return of one repentant sinner is great beyond compare. That is why the Lord cried: "What I want is mercy, not sacrifice (Hos 6:6). I desire not the death of a sinner but his conversion (Ezek 33:11). Even if your sins are like crimson wool I will make them white as snow; even if they are blacker than night I will wash them as white as wool (Isa 1:18)."*²

I just think that is such a beautiful, powerful passage because it's very frequently the case that I've run into people over the years who have expressed to me that they feel as if their sin, their own particular sin or their past, is too great for God to forgive. It's too dark, it's too black, as Isaiah says, to ever be forgiven by the Lord. And the reality is that already in the Old Testament, God is saying that there is no sin you can commit that I can't forgive. How much more is that true in the New Testament, where God himself becomes man, and comes into our world, and goes to the cross in order to offer his life, to pour out his blood, for the forgiveness of our sins. I mean if that doesn't convince us of the love of God, if the cross doesn't

² Clement of Alexandria, *Homily on the Salvation of the Rich* 39; trans. E. Barnecut..

convince us of the mercy of God, I don't know what will. And this parable of the two sons is a perfect example of the fact that Jesus's message and Jesus's ministry was a message of mercy and a ministry of mercy, calling us to repentance from sin. At the same time, it's also a warning to those of us who might've become complacent, to realize that we have to begin that process of conversion and repentance every single day. Every day we have to get up and we have to turn away from sin and choose to walk in the light of the life of Christ, imitating him, imitating his virtue, and trying to be a good son, who not only says "I will obey," but lives that out in a life of faith, hope and charity.