

Sunday closest to September 28

Proper 21
Year A
RCL

Track 1

[Exodus 17:1-7](#)
[Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16](#)
[Philippians 2:1-13](#)
[Matthew 21:23-32](#)

You will not hear from me today that this is Jesus' best parable. It's certainly not my personal favorite. And part of the problem is, as a parable, it's so straightforward and obvious there is not a ton of meat here to dive into. The answer is obvious even to the ones who pushed Jesus to tell it: which son did the right thing- well, the one who said no, but changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard. What's there to discover?

And, so, we, as those who read the bible and try to interpret are sometimes left with the gift of imagination and creativity. What's really happening here? Jesus had just ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowds were cheering his name, proclaiming, "Hosanna, in the highest heaven, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" And as he arrived in Jerusalem he entered the Temple and in a fit of rage, drove out the sellers and the money changers. Add in that poor fig tree that he cursed and it withered to its death, and it was quite a week for Jesus. There were already tensions between him and the chief priests. And when they challenged his authority to do his ministry, to heal and preach about God's Kingdom arriving, he told this story. Now, it can be dangerous if we hear

this as super-secessionist--- replacing the Jews with the Gentiles. So how else can we understand it?

My parents and I talk about the Sunday readings every week, I know, nerd alert; and shocker, I became a priest. This week, my mom sent me a reflection from her daily readings that said this, "When it comes to choices, it seems as if we all have two roads, two ways, two voices within us, each making a claim on our will. Standing at the junction of call and response we look at the choices available to us. Often, it boils down to pondering two roads—a hard, narrow path and a broad, easy byway. Two ways, two roads, two voices." This parable feels very much like, a Robert Frost, the road not taken, two roads diverged in a yellow wood type of parable. And sorry I could not travel both, And be one traveler, long I stood And looked down one as far as I could, To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Here are your two choices, your two paths. There is a father and two sons. The father asked the first son to go work in the vineyard. He said, "no", but later in the day went and worked. The father asked the second son to go work in the vineyard. He said, "yes", but did not go. Which one is right? Choose wisely, you have two choices, and your life depends on it. And while the Gospel is life or death, I really hesitate to read this passage in that way.

Do we only have two choices? Is there a right and wrong way? Or more likely, do we do the right thing, but in the wrong way? Because like any choice we're given, there's a third way to choose. And that is the way of contemplation, which opens up countless choices. Being a Christian in our everyday lives, day in

and day out, is almost never black and white. Choosing the way of contemplation offers us a chance to reflect on what might be best. Somewhere in the story, the first brother changed his mind. And that is where grace enters in. Instead of a quick yes or no, saying that maybe you'll take some time in prayer. The spiritual life is complex and deep as an ocean, and contemplation gives us that moment, however brief, to decide which choice to make.

Are there only two choices? Maybe, actually, in the end, there is only one choice. And that is the choice of love. I shall be telling this with a sigh,
Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took
the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference. So which way will
make the difference for you? For the world? If we base all of our choices on love,
what difference does that make?

In the life of our community here, in each and every one of our interactions with each other and with our neighbors, sheltered and unsheltered, we are given choices. And, some of us feel there are right choices and there are wrong choices. Right ways to proceed ahead with conversations, developments, leadership, how we name our identity. And this is just here. Think about from when you get up in the morning, to when you go to bed, and the chances in every moment to choose love. There is no right way but the way of love. The way of open and civil discourse. The way of treating one another with kindness, having the same mind of Jesus. And not the cliché way of WWJD, but in the sense that humility reigns, our hearts empty of pride, open for God's presence. This is where the choice of love becomes challenging, because it does not mean that those we come in

contact with will have the same response. But choosing this way hopefully opens up the relationship for that movement of the Divine.

In the end, neither one of the sons' actions were perfect or satisfactory. Ideally, their answers would be let their yeses be yes and their nos be no. Author Sam Wells writes that the Christian life is one of Improvisation, a practice in which we develop trust, build relationships, overcome fear, and make choices, all without a script. It's terrifying to know our choices and the responses to them are limitless. But, what do we have to lose if we base those on love? Like any good spiritual director, rabbi, priest, guru, Jesus' answer of the chief priests' and elders' question with a question opened up the opportunity for them to discover the nature of God. How did it open it up for you?