

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
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Our Savior's Lutheran - Bonner MT
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This morning's Gospel sure is confusing. It's not that the parable is all that difficult. It's probably one of the easiest parables to understand.

A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' The son answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second son and said the same; and the second son answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" The first one, of course.

The first son was the only one who did anything, so obviously he did the will of his father. But here's where it gets confusing. Jesus announced that tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of Heaven first because they believed in the message of John the Baptist—they believed in Jesus.

But the religious leaders will have to stand in line because they have not believed in the message of John the Baptist... they have not believed in Jesus.

Do you see the dilemma? The parable is about doing but the point of the parable is about believing. So how do we enter the Kingdom of Heaven - is it a matter of right believing or right doing?

Which of the two did the will of his father? That's the crucial question, hidden within the parable. The parable is really about the will of God, isn't it? "Thy will be done," we pray, but what is the will of God? There is a lot of speculation about God's will... what God wants in specific situations.

Many people will tell you what is God's will; it's clear to them. Perhaps it's clear to us as well. But I wonder what God would say is God's will?

Actually scripture tells us quite clearly what God's will is; God wants to have a relationship with us. It's the story that unfolds in our bibles, from the first

to the last page. In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And God made human beings in God's own image. Not with arms and legs and noses that resemble God's anatomy. We don't know what God looks like, if God has an appearance at all. For all we know, God is pure spirit—no physical being at all, but we don't know that for sure.

Yet we are created in the image of God. What an honor and a delight! So far as we know, human beings are the only part of creation capable of comprehending the whole idea of God. Only people are capable of a relationship with God.

This Genesis story provides a picture of the way God wanted things to be. God is described as walking through the Garden of Eden at the time of the evening breeze. Imagine that! God out for an evening walk, stopping by for a visit. God is in relationship with Adam and Eve.

Scripture goes on to say that sin destroyed the relationship between God and ourselves, that God intended for us. But God's will continued to be the same—to heal the brokenness, to once again be in relationship with us. The theological words are redemption, forgiveness, salvation. They all mean the same thing; overcoming the sin that separates us from God.

This is the Bible story. The Bible is the story of salvation history, the story of how God has worked in human history to redeem people. It's the story of which Jesus is central. God so loved the world that God gave Jesus to die for us. Jesus died so we could be in relationship with God. That's what the cross is about; it's a historical event through which God restores the relationship between God and ourselves.

The story of salvation history continues into the future, beyond this present moment, a future described at the end of the Bible as one in which Jesus will return, and God and God's people will live together in relationship. This is the will of God—to be in relationship with us; God shows us God's love and wants us to love God in return.

So now that we know the will of God; does that help us understand this morning's Gospel? How do we enter the Kingdom of Heaven? By right believing or right doing?

What about a third option... could it be a matter of right relationship? Could it be a matter of receiving God's love for us as a gift? And then, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we respond to God's love for us by loving God in return? "We love because he first loved us." That's what we learn in 1 John 4:19. That's what we learn in life, too, that God first reaches out to us in love, inviting us to love God in return.

Let's go back to this first son in the parable, who at first refused to go to work for his father, but later changed his mind. Why did he change his mind? I suspect that when his father first asked him, he really did not want to do it. Perhaps he had other plans... fun plans. Quite likely, he just didn't care for vineyard work. Maybe he thought vineyard work was boring.

But although he didn't like vineyard work, he loved his father, and so out of love for his father, he did what his father wanted him to do.

And what about the second son, who said yes when his Father asked him, but then didn't go into the vineyard at all? What if his yes to his father came from fear of his father. "Yes, I will go, sir;" but then as soon as his father was out of sight, he did other things.

So which of the two did the will of his father? The first or the second? The one who loved his father. In the end, obedience to God grows out of love for God... right relationship, receiving love from God and returning God's love.

It's a hard concept, isn't it – to do the will of God? Once again, God takes the initiative, inviting us into relationship with God's self. From the very beginning, when we are first conceived, God begins to make plans to be our God, and to claim us as God's own.

And after we're born, God calls us to the waters of baptism. Words are spoken and action is taken. There is water and God's words of promise, claiming us as children of God. But we're only actors on God's behalf. Baptism is something God does.

God continues to take the initiative, coming to us through God's word, in personal study, and worship, through the teachings of people around us who are faithful.

Throughout life, God calls us to prayer, and God listens, and God responds. Over and over again, God calls us to the Lord's table, to receive Christ, to remember God's love shown so clearly to us on the cross.

God is clear about God's will; God wants a relationship with us. God loves us; giving us the strength to respond with love. Giving us the strength even to go to work in the vineyard, even though we don't enjoy the work. Even though we have so many other things to do. Even if it means loving our neighbor.

And by the way, there will be times when we will not go and do the will of God. When we fail to do God's will, does that mean we don't love God? Hardly. We are human beings who fail, whose love is imperfect. God understands and forgives. God continues to love with perfect love. And God calls us once again, over and over again, to love God and to obey God.

This love from God is what gives us hope – because we know God's love is unconditional, endless. While our love comes and goes, the good news for today is that God's love for us will never end. It doesn't depend on anything that we do. It just calls us into relationship with God. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ²What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? ³As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

²⁵Yet you say, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? ²⁶When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. ²⁷Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. ²⁸Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. ²⁹Yet the house of Israel says, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

³⁰Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. ³¹Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³²For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

Psalms 25:1-9

¹To you, O LORD,
I lift up my soul.

²**My God, I put my trust in you; let me not be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.**

³Let none who look to you be put to shame;
rather let those be put to shame who are treacherous.

⁴**Show me your ways, O LORD,
and teach me your paths.**

⁵Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day
long.

⁶**Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love,
for they are from everlasting.**

⁷Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions;

remember me according to your steadfast love and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.

**⁸You are gracious and upright, O LORD;
therefore you teach sinners in your way.**

⁹You lead the lowly in justice
and teach the lowly your way.

Philippians 2:1-13

¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Matthew 21:23-32

²³When [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."