

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 25, 2011

The parable of the Two Sons belongs to a special group, parables that tell us not only that salvation has dawned, that the Redeemer has appeared, but that salvation has come to the poor, that Jesus has come to save sinners. It belongs to the parables of mercy. You remember them, I'm sure.

The shepherd who loses one sheep, leaves the other 99 in the wilderness, goes after the one that has strayed. The woman who loses one silver coin, forgets about the rest of her money, lights a lamp, sweeps the house frantically till she finds it. The two men whose debts are forgiven. The Pharisee and the toll collector in the temple. And now the two sons.

There is a fascinating facet to these parables of mercy. Each of them was addressed to opponents of Jesus: murmuring scribes, grumbling Pharisees, critical theologians, and here today, members of the Sanhedrin. These are enemies of the gospel, indignant that Jesus should assert that God cares about sinners, incensed that he would eat with people they despised.

What does Jesus tell them? These sinners, these people you despise, are nearer to God than you. They may have disobeyed God's call; their professions have debased them; but they have shown sorrow and repentance. More than that, these are the people who can appreciate God's goodness. They have what Jesus' critics lack: a deep gratitude to God for God's goodness.

It's a strong lesson, strongly phrased. Those who should have been the leading candidates for entry into God's kingdom are precisely those who are in danger of not getting in at all. Pharisees, models of observance, who knew the law thoroughly and followed it exactly. The scribes, lawyers and teachers of the law, devoted to its study and exposition. Members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council and tribunal of the Jews. These fine fellows will watch the lowliest of the low parading into the kingdom, and they will be standing outside scratching their heads, wondering what went wrong.

What did go wrong? Precisely here is the parable's pertinence for all Christians. The people with power, the people with knowledge, were sure they were upright, righteous, right with God. Why? Because they knew the law and they did it. Everything – save one thing. Everything – save the most significant thing. I mean what Jesus said to the Pharisees: “Go, and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’” Of course the sacrifices in the temple were important. But when the burnt offerings took precedence over burning injustice, when temple observance kept them from parenting the orphans and helping the stranger, from defending the downtrodden and protecting the poor, then their sacrifices became an “abomination” to the Lord. Yes, an abomination.

And so for us Christians. Of course our faith is precious to us. But, to echo the Letter of James, “What does it profit, my sisters and brothers, if one says they have faith but has not works? Can their faith save them? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?” Of course our love of God takes priority over all else. But the first commandment of the law makes no Jewish or Christian sense without the second commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Of course the Mass is the focus, the center, the heart of our worship. But even this makes no Christian sense if all about us are women, men and children half-dead for want of our bread or our love.

Christ our Savior is not a respecter of persons. At the Last Judgment he will not say to me: “Ah yes, you’re a priest. Enter into the joy of your Lord.” If we can believe the Gospel of Matthew, Christ will want to know what I did when his belly was growling with hunger, his tongue parched with thirst; when he had no pillow for his head, no clothes for his nakedness; when he was alone with his sickness or a faceless number in a jail.

Good friends at Christ Our Hope: This is our first anniversary. There is indeed much to celebrate. We’ve opened the church debt free; we’re a growing congregation; we welcome all. The list could go on and on. The point is, we are not only *in* but *at* “the heart of downtown Seattle.” Which is another way of saying that our love of God is not, must never be, imprisoned within these lovely walls. Our ministry begins at the front door of the Josephinum, stretches in every direction, wherever life is threatened or a child of God lies helpless.

The passage from Philippians that is read today captures the very essence of what it means to be Christian. It includes an exhortation to fashion our own minds and hearts after the example of Jesus who chooses to be the servant of all. With your hearts and your outstretched arms, I am not afraid that “the toll collectors and the harlots will go into the kingdom of God before you.” I suspect we will all go in together!

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