

26th Sunday Ordinary Time Year "A"

September 28, 2014

Readings: Ezekiel 18:25-28; Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 21:28-32

Today's Gospel includes a riddle of sorts. Admittedly, I have never been very good at them. My competitive nature gets the best of me when I do not understand them, because I see my failure as a negative reflection on me. They can be cryptic, confusing, and less than straight forward. So why did Jesus use them? I suspect the answer is in part because he wanted to engage more than our hearts, but our minds as well.

Today, Jesus did not really ask a trick question, but a fairly straightforward question. Who did the will of the master—the one who said he would work, but chose not to, or the one who declined the invitation, but later changed his mind and went to work after all? The scribes were smart enough to say that what mattered most was the one who actually went into the vineyard. So far so good. The problem lies in the fact that the listeners did not realize that the question (riddle) was directed at them.

They were the equivalent of the worker who said "Yes," but never quite made it to the vineyard...something came up which simply could not wait. Jesus lets them in on the secret in a most disturbing way—those hated by society and those considered sinners of the worst sort will enter the kingdom of heaven before they will. Jesus is condemning hypocrisy, a reality that we are quite capable of recognizing all around us, in almost all circumstances, save one—namely, that of ourselves.

In excoriating the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus places special emphasis on their hypocrisy in several places in the New Testament. He does not criticize their devotion—they are devout. However, their devotion never approaches the kind of total dedication necessary of a true disciple. They say all the right things, and even do many good things. But the talk is never consistent with the actual production.

“Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather humbly regard others as more important than yourselves.” A hypocrite could never do this, because he is more concerned with looking good than being good.

One common problem in this area is when people say to themselves. “I know I fall short, so I had better not offer any opinion about right and wrong, lest I be considered a hypocrite.” This attitude is as common as it is flawed. A hypocrite is not someone who sins; a hypocrite is the one who essentially denies the reality of sin in his/her own life.

For example, a father could speak out to his kids against drinking or smoking even if he had made some mistakes in that area when younger. One does not need to be perfect before one speaks out. However, if we continually make excuses for our mistakes or blames them on others, then our words ring hollow. Do not criticize the language of others if you are unwilling to watch your own. Jesus did not ask for perfection, as much as the willingness to be perfected.

Vainglory is not a common word in today’s parlance, but the word *vanity* occurred several times this past week in the daily readings from the Book of Ecclesiastes. It is the inordinate love or desire for the praise and honor of others. If we let our desire for praise obscure our dependence upon God, we act with vanity. The second reading this weekend warns against this attitude. For what reason do we seek glory? Are we using God’s gifts to our best ability? Or, are we using our gifts so that others may see them?

A good intention (for example, that of helping one's neighbor) does not make behavior that is intrinsically sinful, such as lying and calumny, good or just. The end does not justify the means. Conversely, an added bad intention (such as vainglory) makes an act evil that, in and of itself, can be good (such as almsgiving).¹

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. #1753

A good test of this is fairly simple:

Let's say that you worked hard at something that went quite well. It felt rewarding to be part of it, yet you did not get much credit. Would you be left with a completely empty feeling in your stomach, or would you still focus on what went well? President Ronald Reagan himself subscribed to the adage of coaches everywhere, that it is amazing how much can be accomplished when no one cares who gets the credit.

I am not implying that credit should not be given where credit is due. However, if for whatever reason credit is not given, how does this make us respond? Are we angry? Has all of the joy from the effort been removed? I hope not. Sometimes being on the sidelines can be very freeing. God knows the heart. St. Augustine said: "But He who is above all, however much He may praise himself, does not uplift himself. For knowledge of God is **our need**, not His."²

God does not seek his own glory, even though he most certainly could. He only glories in seeing us become closer to Him. Doing the will of the Father is our ultimate source of happiness, as well as its cause. This is what puts our hearts at ease. Let us today recommit ourselves to seeking God's will and His alone. Let us carry within ourselves the same attitude as Christ, giving credit where credit is due.

² Augustine, commentary on John 13:13, *Tract. LVIII in Ioannis*