

## *Doing the will of the father*

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*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? When 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. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Yet 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? Ezekiel 18:25-29*

*Jesus said, "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which 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. For 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." Matthew 21:28-32*

The late Anthony DeMello, a Jesuit, once recalled a church where a beloved parishioner was gravely ill, to the point of death. The priest issued a summons: *"Go out—quickly! Find ten people to pray with us."* Ten people were hastily assembled. But soon the deacon whispered: *"Father, some of these now praying are well-known thieves."* "Excellent," the priest responded. *"We are locked outside the gates of mercy. These experts may help us break in."*<sup>1</sup>

St. Matthew, author by tradition of today's gospel passage, may have known all about being pegged as a well-known thief. In his life-before-Jesus he collected taxes for the Roman Empire. Imagine the whispers among the religious gatekeepers among his fellow Jews.

It's no surprise, then, that Matthew's gospel includes a worsening crisis arising from contempt and whispering directed at Jesus by the letter-of-the-law scribes and Pharisees. Jesus confronts them in today's gospel when he says, *"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."*

How dare he! How dare he especially in Jerusalem, and so publicly, here, outside the Temple. *"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."* And who, I wonder, may be going into the kingdom of God ahead of me?

Prior to his harsh pronouncement, Jesus tells a story to provoke our usual notions of what will or should happen to a given individual or class of individuals. As with so many teachings of and stories told by Jesus in Matthew, this one relies on reversal. The appointed text from last Sunday, by the way, ended with reversal: *"The last will be first, and the first will be last."* (Matt. 20:16) And Jesus invokes divine reversal again a few chapters after today's text but still addressing the same scribes and Pharisees on the same day in the same scene *"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."* (Matt. 23:12)

In the case of the story Jesus tells at the start of today's passage, Jesus employs a double reversal. Son One defies his father's request to work in the vineyard, but then he goes and works. Son Two dutifully agrees to go to work – *Sir, I go!* – but then fails to do so.

“Which of the two did the will of the father?” Jesus asks. The answer is as clear to us now as it was to those who first heard the question. The son who said he would *not* go but then *does* go and work is the one who “*did the will of the father.*” Harder to see are the two sons in our own lives, which child you or I may or may not be, or how we label, welcome, endorse, associate with, whisper about or crucify one kind of son or daughter or the other. And on what basis?

By way of these two sons, Jesus is delving into a universal religious problem: the connections – and disconnections – between who we say we are and what we say we believe and what we actually do or do not do, who we actually are and are not, in ‘real life.’ Many prophets before Jesus went down this same road. Maybe you heard the theme in today’s query from the prophet Ezekiel. His argument also relies on reversal: “... *the righteous [who] turn away from their righteousness .... the wicked [who] turn away from ... wickedness.*” For their questioning and exposing, the prophets, also, were ostracized, punished or killed.

The dilemma of how words and creeds connect to our lived values and deeds is not, of course, unique to Judeo-Christian tradition. Many traditions recognize how rare is the soul whose words and actions perfectly align. Anthony DeMello, the Jesuit, again, tells a beautiful story about Tetsugen, a 17th century Japanese follower of Zen. After translating the Buddhist sutras for the first time from Chinese to Japanese, Tetsugen went on a mission to raise the funds to create the woodblocks and print 7,000 copies of the sutras.

Raising the funds took ten years. Just before the project was to begin a great flood devastated the region. Famine followed. Tetsugen gave all of the money raised for the printing to keep thousands from starving.

Several years later, the money for the printing of the sutras had again been raised. But before the project could get underway, an epidemic devastated the land. Tetsugen gave all of the money for the relief of the sick and suffering.

Twenty years after he’d begun, in a third effort, Tetsugen again raised the money, and his dream of printing 7,000 sutras was fulfilled. The woodblocks from that first printing of the sutras can still be seen at the Ōbaku monastery in Kyoto. They say there that Tetsugen produced three first editions of the sutras in Japanese. And they say that the first two editions, though now invisible, far surpass the last.<sup>2</sup>

Tetsugen seems to have illustrated the sometimes complicated relationship between right or inspired words and right and holy actions. The scribes and Pharisees confronted by Jesus in today’s gospel seem less adept, as do so many of us, so much of the time. The consequences of their disconnections, and ours, for ourselves and others, can include whispering, denial, pride, abuses of power, shame, ostracism, crucifixion.

Take-home assignments from today’s gospel may require us to reconsider others, or ourselves. Jesus may be asking us to look more closely at our religious designations of others. Surely he is also calling all of us out, calling us to be counted among those who not only say yes but also actually go and do the father’s will. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from DeMello, Anthony, *Taking Flight*, Doubleday, 1988, p. 64

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 59f