

## The Parable of Raising Teenagers

<sup>23</sup>When he 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?” <sup>24</sup>Jesus 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. <sup>25</sup>Did 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?’ <sup>26</sup>But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup>So 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.

<sup>28</sup>“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ <sup>29</sup>He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>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.”



No one from the NRSV Updated Edition reached out to me to name this parable but if they had instead of calling it the parable of the two sons, I would have called it the parable of raising teenagers-Or maybe the parable of teaching middle school.

I can practically see these kids in my mind's eye. The first one is the kid who comes to your class with a warning. This kid has a file 3 inches thick and more labels than a can of soup. You've got notes from last year's teacher and even the mom will sometimes walk this kid in and wish you luck on the first day. The second kid- that one is "the quiet quitter," the under the radar kid, that no one understands why you would have an issue with. They are respectful, the bow and their hair matches the logo on their polo shirt. They are never out of uniform or dress code, and if you go to last year's teacher about what happened on the assessment- it seems like there is a stack of excuses.

The first kid has the no for every yes, this kid has a high for every low. This kid is a power struggle waiting to happen. What is amazing about teaching, or parenting, or nurturing this kid is that as long as you don't need to take the direct approach- it is smooth sailing. This is the kid that you write the long class pledge for. This is the kid that loves a routine, who thrives in knowing what to expect. This kid will do almost anything for you as long as they feel like you are on their side.

The second kid is tougher. They struggle to trust. They have a wall and a mote. They have skills to keep you out. For these

kids, it's very important that you see them, it's very important that you are wise to what they are doing, but you have to be careful, if you pick a fight with this kid, you probably won't win. They understand that attitude- I don't get mad- I get even. It's usually not worth it to call them out directly. You need to let them know that you are onto them, but keep it subtle. Many of these kids love competition- their public image is paramount. If you really get to know them sometimes you can figure out their currency. if you can do that- you have made an incredible ally and nurtured a profound leader.

Jesus' challenge is clear- but amazingly- the conversation is also full of grace.

Can I tell you a secret about good teachers- they always love the naughty ones. They may whine about them in the teacher's lounge to their friends- but like a puzzle- they don't like to put them down until they figure them out. They take them into their prayers. They think about them on their drive in, they research- they experiment- and they celebrate when we get them figured out. Good teachers LOVE all of their students- but the naughty ones make it fun.

Jesus loves the chief priests and elders of the people not just the tax collectors and the prostitutes.

When he tells that they will be second- not only is he reassuring them that they in fact have a place in the kingdom of God- he is

offering them a nearly irresistible invitation- saying- you could do better. If Competition and public image are both highly motivating to them- this statement is like cat nip.

As we understand these characters, we can start to see how their challenges are like ours.

So, using the same technique as last week- we can consider places in our lives where we are like the first child and places in our life together where we are like the second child, and places in our lives where we are like their parent. We can consider that Jesus is calling. Right now- today. Jesus is calling each of us. And there are places in our lives where we are like the dad. We understand the work, and we are even inviting others into it. There are places where we are like the first kid- and we say no- and then God gently works in our hearts until we find our way to yes, and there are places in our lives where we are like that second kid- we say yes with our mouths, but when it comes to moving into action, we check out. Even though Matthew didn't write them down- there are at least a million other ways to say no to God- with our mouths, with our actions, in our hearts, in our lives.

Saying yes to God is the constant invitation of being God's children- but because we live in the not- quite yet there world, it is not always clear or easy to do.

I've skipped to the second half of our reading of the parable, but backing up for just a minute I would love to address this question of authority that started the whole passage. In our reading this morning Jesus is interacting with the ruling class. It is funny that they do not question that he has authority- clearly, they can see that he does. Instead, they ask where does his authority come from. And while we know that it comes from God, the question behind their question may be primarily be- are you here to upset our authority?

1st century Judea was a precarious place. Jerusalem was controlled by the Roman Empire, and the authority given to the priests and the ruling families was a proxy control. Life was difficult. Roman authority was based on cruel economic and social control. The ruling families we're on a very short leash. The source of their power, as limited as it was, was a quiet loyalty to the Romans, and their ability to enforce the peace of the Pax Romana.

When Jesus answers their question he bobs and weaves like a master debater- making it clear that he has the upper hand- and answering their question in the affirmative- Jesus lets them know that he is not there to protect their knife-edge position. Jesus has come to upset their authority.

Jesus offers grace, yes, but make no mistake- he is taking a terrible risk at the same time.

This morning- even with boxes of books and suitcases under our communion table- headed off to Chinle, headed off to Cuba- this passage reminds us that Jesus is calling- we are his precious children- and that is is hard both to say yes, and to do yes.

In the broken in between of living in the kingdom- and also living in the world this passage shows us. More than the others, just how hard it is to follow God.

The Grace of this passage is not only the profound invitation that even when we turn away with our mouth with our deeds, but what we have done, and what we have left undone- that with God's love we are still heirs to the kingdom.

Friends in Christ here in the church- we have learned that we must be like little, tiny children- humble and open. We have learned that God goes out to find the lost sheep and leaves the 99 of us sitting in the Pew. We have learned that conflict and forgiveness are at the heart of a life of grace and have learned again that the first will be last and the last will be first. In this final teaching of our series, Jesus tells us saying yes to God is hard- it will cost us, and that even when we fall short- that we still live in God's love.

The hard message of this passage is just how easy it is for us to be like those kids-

But The invitation here is to keep at it. Even when we say no, we can change our hearts, even when we do no- we still have the chance to move into action.

The good news of this passage, is just like that good coach, the good scout leader, that good teacher, that good parent who loves us- God comes along side us- God does not give up on us- just like the two teens on our bulletin cover- God is constantly helping us to answer the call- not just with our mouths, but with our whole selves.

Friends in Christ, In the Kingdom of heaven, with a little persistence and a lot of grace, even when it's not our first response, with God's help each one of us can say and do yes, Here I am God.

Hallelujah, Amen.