

TO STAY OR GO? AND WHY?

Texts: Matthew 21:28-32

John 6:60,66-68

We here in the family of Northminster have recently shared with Youth Ministry Director Scott Simmons and Northminster Member Hanna Simmons, the joy they experienced in the recent birth of their baby daughter, Sophia. Now, as the days and weeks go by, we who are parents are sharing with them, by means of our memories, the experiences that we have had in the new parenting process to be compared with those they are now experiencing as a new mother and father. As a matter of fact, a weary-from-lack-of-sleep Scott has spoken of his bemusement at the number of us who, when hearing his stories of Sophia's irregular sleeping intervals and his own exhaustion, give a wink and a nod to each other smiling like Cheshire Cats while saying something that sounds very much like, "just wait."

This retrospective sadism is probably most acute among parents whose children have now grown into their teenage years. A writer named William Galvin shares this wisdom, that "Mother Nature is providential. She gives us twelve years to develop a love for our children before turning them into teenagers." The trials and tribulations experienced during our children's teenage years gives substance to the idea that few things in life are more satisfying than watching other parents, especially our children, have teenagers of their own.

But it isn't all one-sided of course. Teens often experience their parents as some kind of unholy mongrelization between fonts of infrequent wisdom and barely tolerable creatures from another planet who just don't get life on this one. Mark Twain is traditionally given credit for this observation:

"When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."

This is to preface the assumption that the Gospel Reading for today is all about parents and their older children and the tug-of-war that often defines the relationships between the two. A father tells his two sons to go out and work in his fields. One says, "Buzz off, Pop. I've got more important things to do." But then that son has a change of heart and returns to work in the fields as his father wishes. The other son says, "Sure, Dad, I'll go. Absolutely. It's cool. Count on me," and then doesn't go. We nod our heads knowingly. Yep, we say, some things haven't changed in all those years. Parents had headaches with their kids twenty centuries ago.

But if we are tempted to interpret this passage in this way, we'd be wrong. This parable is not about family dynamics and the frustrations that exist between parents and their older children. This passage is about choice. It is about the choice we have regarding Jesus.

A tragic fact about these particular verses from the Gospel of Matthew is that they have often been used as proof-text for anti-Semitism, differentiating the bad-guy Jews who rejected Jesus from the good-guy Christians who embraced him. But this is a gross distortion of the parable. It is, again, all about a choice that is made in any faith community between doing God's will and not.

The second passage I've chosen for this morning is from the Gospel of John. It, too, has to do with a choice. Jesus has just shared some very difficult teachings, ideas offensive to the ears of his hearers, and many of them have chosen to leave this rabbi behind to try to find a more palatable teacher elsewhere.

It has often been said of preachers that we are to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. The first part of that we never have any trouble with. We can make the sanctuary awash in comfort. But when it comes to exercising the second of those two mandates, we can get

ourselves into serious trouble. It is then, at times, we discover that our parishioners also have a choice to stay or to go, and, to reduce the situation to its crassest lowest common denominator, to take their pledges with them, to another faith community with more comfort and less affliction. All of us who share this vocation are aware of this risk, and because we have bills of our own to pay, families to support, and are subject to the vagaries of an economy blind to the virtues of our noble calling, we often react by providing more comfort and less affliction from these pulpits where we purport to speak for God.

But the passage from John's Gospel is also not about fickle congregants and reluctant clergy. Rather it, too, is about a choice regarding Jesus, and not just the Jesus we most like, the gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who graces the alabaster halls, is represented in the magnificent stained glass, inspires the sublime music, and adorns the colorful Sunday School stories we tell our children, but also the prophetic, activist loving, justice advocating, angry and indignant Jesus who gets in our faces and says, "Do you also wish to go away?"

The parable of the father and his two sons, if we look at it closely, frames this choice clearly and uncomfortably for people of faith who think they are sitting pretty by virtue of their spoken allegiance to Jesus as Lord and, perhaps, their active-by-degrees participation in a community of faith. The first son Jesus equates with those people in any particular cultural setting who seem to have rejected God because they have, by choice or necessity, rejected the ways the faithful have set up as the most appropriate ways of relating to God. For those in Jesus' day, it was the prostitutes and the tax-collectors, and others of the marginalized, looked-down-upon, hated and despised participants in their society. But because many of these outcasts had come to Jesus, and had embraced the Good News of the Gospel and understood Jesus' true significance as one in whom the fullness of God dwelled, they were considered by Jesus to be those who, even though they had said "no" to the conventional God of the religious establishment, had nonetheless done God's will by choosing Jesus as God's revelation to humanity.

The second son, the one treated less charitably in the parable because he had said "yes" to his father's request, but "no" later, represents within this parable the community of faith who pay ceremonial homage to their Lord through right ritual, accepted piety, and appropriate sacrifice, but when it comes to the hard challenges that disciples of Christ are called to assume in the world, they ignore, defer, or under-achieve them. Jesus was not the first to call such persons to account because of their faith's misplaced emphasis. The Old Testament prophet Amos, speaking the words of God, assails such behavior:

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amo 5:21-24)

These people of faith and these communities of faith are like the son who says, "yes, Father, I will go work in the field", but who later refuse to do so, because that work is hard, it is unnatural by worldly standards, it is painful and costly, it may yield very little in the way of return. It calls upon them to love their enemies, to pray for their persecutors, forgive without limits, practice extravagant compassion, welcome the stranger, include the marginalized and rejected, and give thanks to God in all things. Yet, despite their refusal, they continue to accept being part of the father's household, eating the father's food, sleeping under the father's roof, enjoying the father's protection. But they have failed to do their father's will.

In the passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus has just shared a difficult teaching which represented his desire that his followers take him fully into their lives, receive the “whole” Jesus and not just the good and acceptable parts, the easy parts, the inspirational parts. Many could not do so. They fell away, they departed, they left the “whole” Jesus behind.

Last Tuesday, at the regular meeting of the Presbytery of Chicago, the assembly heard a sermon from the Rev. Dan McNerney, a minister with the Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, who shared some remarkable statistics about world Christianity today: that, whereas at the beginning of the last century 70% of Christians could be found in the western hemisphere, now that statistic has been reversed, and only 30% of the world’s Christians are citizens of western nations like America and Europe. The fastest growing Christian nation is China, and it’s projected that by the year 2050, an amazing 50% of China’s population could be Christian. By contrast, today only 5% of Europeans are professed church-goers. Most astounding of all is the fact that now these nations with growing Christian populations are sending missionaries to the western countries to evangelize us. It would seem that Christians in the west are falling away from Jesus.

Of course, that doesn’t apply to us because here we are in church. We haven’t fallen away, we haven’t left our faith behind. No, we haven’t. But we should never forget that the second son in Jesus’ parable, the one who told his father he would work but didn’t, was aimed at the communities of faith who assumed themselves fully faithful and obedient, but who in reality had failed to completely embrace the will of God and accept the whole Jesus. The second son’s response to his father, “I go, sir,” reveals an interesting insight when one goes to the Greek language in which the New Testament was first written. The Greek word employed in this verse, which is translated into English as “sir”, is *kyrie*, which many of you will recognize as also the word which we translate as “Lord”. This naturally brings to mind the admonishment of Jesus earlier in the Gospel of Matthew to those in the faith community who pay him lip service alone:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21)

Jesus asked, “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.’”

"This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?", asked the people listening to Jesus. And many of them chose to go.

But some chose to stay. Jesus, after no doubt sadly observing the exodus of disciples from his company, turns to the original twelve and asks, with an implied touch of melancholy anticipation, “Do you also wish to go away.” Peter, speaking for the group, responds, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

This response has a faint suggestion of resignation to it, as though these disciples as well were troubled by Jesus’ teaching. But something had seized on to them, they had come to know the depth and breadth of this one in whom the wisdom of God had come to rest and the vocabulary of eternity had found a voice. Therefore, they will stay. They must stay. They will stay despite the discomfort. They will stay even though they do not understand fully the magnitude of what Jesus represents for the world. They will stay because, once one glimpses and hears something of the eternal depths, with their wonder and hope, one cannot go away. One cannot go back.

The difference between the disciples who stayed with Jesus and the ones who went away involves taking the “whole” Jesus unto oneself. It involves not only saying, “yes, I will do God’s will”, which in this parable meant embracing Jesus as Lord, but also doing God’s will by serving

this Lord actively, obeying this Lord's commands as they are made known. Jesus is not simply a practiced religion which requires or suggests certain rites and repeats certain creedal formulas and offers up acceptable sacrifices. No, Jesus is more than that. Jesus is a way, and a truth, and a light, a way through the Valley of the Shadow and into the Realm of Life.

So, these passages, as I said at the beginning, are passages about choice regarding Jesus. The question of whether we stay or whether we go is virtually never engaged in any meaningful way on the superficial level of which church is most comfortable, which church is most like our political views, which church is most comforting and less afflicting. The question is whether we stay at Jesus' side, continuing to listen, to be challenged, to accept and endure the discomfort and risk, moving towards that time when our spirits break through into enlightenment, and we begin to understand at last, and we discover that we cannot leave. For then, the question will make sense: to whom else can we go? Jesus will represent and embody for us the eternal depths where there is at the last peace and hope.

The struggle for us is not only whether to stay, but to understand why we are staying, to ask the question "why", not to anyone else but ourselves, so that each of us knows with conviction why we are here, not only at Northminster Presbyterian Church, but here, in the presence of the Risen Christ, which is not only here, but everywhere else as well, throughout life and on into eternity.

Lord, to whom shall we go? When that question has no other answers that carry meaning or possibility then, truly, we will understand the first son's behavior, we will understand why those disciples could not, could not leave.

AMEN.