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Exodus 17: 1 – 7 Psalm 78: 1 – 4, 12 – 16
 Philippians 2: 1 – 13 Matthew 21: 23 – 32

In his book, *Experiencing Jesus*, Mark Link, a Jesuit, writes that Jesus' parables are "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning." In other words, Jesus uses familiar, ordinary images from daily life in order to teach us something that we don't know, or haven't realized. Furthermore, Link writes, there are two kinds of parables: 1) window stories; and 2) mirror stories.

A window is, of course, something through which we see beyond, so a window parable is a story that helps give us a glimpse of the kingdom. Think of all the "Kingdom of God is like ___" parables. They are parables that show us something about the nature of God, e.g. that God cares for the lost and the least.

While we look *through* a window, we look *at* a mirror. A mirror, of course, reflects back at us. Mirror parables are stories that hold up a mirror to us, giving us word pictures of what is true versus what we want to *think* is true.

Today, we get to hear one of Jesus' mirror parables in the story of the two sons, the ones whom the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor calls the "Yes and No Brothers." In telling this parable, Jesus is holding up a mirror to the Chief Priests and Elders at the Temple who are challenging him. Of course, we are also invited to look in that mirror.

The setting for today's Gospel is Jesus' last appearance in the Temple before he is arrested, tried and crucified. The chief priests and elders are questioning Jesus' authority, specifically, who or what gives him the authority to do the things that he has been doing. This is really important because Jesus claims to be acting in God's name when he is doing these things. As the ones responsible for the faith, morals and institutional life of Judaism, the chief priests and elders not only have a right to ask, they have a responsibility to do so. Especially given Jesus' recent behavior.

The previous day, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, enacting the prophet Zechariah's foretelling of the coming of Israel's savior king. Then, he had come to the Temple, where he overturned all the money changers' tables and let loose all the birds and other animals that people could purchase to make prescribed sacrifices. All the while, Jesus was condemning the practices of the Temple leadership and quoting the prophet Jeremiah, who spoke of the destruction of the Temple. That was Jesus' previous visit about 24 hours earlier. So the Temple leadership might be forgiven for wanting to know what is going on with Jesus when they ask, "Just who do you think you are, Jesus?"

Jesus' answer is in two parts. Jesus knows that it is a question that should not be answered if it is a trap – i.e. if it is being asked to make him vulnerable, if it is being asked out of the leaders' self-interest, if there is no answer that will truly be heard, or if it is a maneuver for position and power rather than authenticity. So Jesus does what many rabbis do – he answers their question with his own question, and then he tells a story. It takes a little longer than just giving the Temple leaders a straight answer, but, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out, Jesus is not one to give people answers that they could come up with on their own. "Where did John the Baptizer's authority come from?" From Jesus' perspective, it's a question with an easy answer. But it rather cleverly puts the Temple leadership between a rock and a hard place.

It's easy to imagine these robed and bearded men quickly going into a football huddle to plan their response. They are darned if they do and darned if they don't. John claimed that his own ministry of baptism did for people what the whole system of Temple sacrifices were supposed to do. Minus the Temple. So, if they affirm that John's ministry was from God, then they undermine the whole Temple system they serve. If they recognize John's authority as coming from God, then Jesus' next question is, of course, well why didn't you listen to him? But if they say that John was just some upstart, acting on his own agenda, then the people might riot, because at least *some* people think John WAS from God. Remember, it's nearly Passover, and Jerusalem and the Temple are filled with Jewish pilgrims. It will not take much incitement for things to get out of hand. The leaders need the financial support of all the people coming in to make sacrifices. It's a moment of awkward silence as the chief priests and elders turn back to Jesus. They try to maintain a diplomatic middle ground by pleading ignorance. "We don't know."

At this point, Jesus tells this mirror parable that lets the leadership know there is no middle ground in God's Kingdom. Jesus tells the story of two sons, each of whom are asked by their father to go work in the vineyard. Remember, just as in last week's Gospel lesson, and next Sunday's as well, "vineyard" is a well-established metaphor for Israel, and the Temple leaders know that.

The first son says, "No!" and turns back to his Playstation 4. The father then goes to the other son who's busy checking out his social media accounts. When the father asks him to go out into the vineyard and work, the second son looks up briefly with a cheery, "Sure!" and then his eyes glaze back over as he continues skimming posts. Meanwhile, the first son has second thoughts, turns off the games, picks up a pair of clippers and heads to the vineyard. Hours later, the second son emerges once again from his phone and vaguely remembers his father coming in to say something...

"Which one does what the father asks?" Jesus asks the Temple leaders. Apparently what the sons say isn't as important as what they actually do. "The first one," the chief priests and elders respond. It's okay so far, but what really gets Jesus into trouble is the next part. Because, just in case the Temple leadership doesn't get his reasonably sharp point, Jesus hones it a little further. The rude son who responds "No!" to his father represents the 'crooks and the whores' as the Rev. Eugene Peterson paraphrases it. The people, whose daily lives seemed to be a boisterous "No!" got John's message and they changed their lives. On the other hand, the polite, cheery, "Sure!" of the second son is the Temple leadership. On the surface, they pay lip service to God, but in their actions, such as refusing to believe John's message, they are far from God. Now they are being called to account and they are not happy about it. The mere idea that vile tax collectors and prostitutes might be ushered into the Kingdom of God ahead of them (ahead, not instead) is just too much for them.

It turns out that the story isn't really about authority but rather about how one responds to God's call to repentance and God's invitation into the Kingdom. It's very easy to label the Temple leadership as the bad guys in the story. Why can't they see that Jesus and John are of God and that they themselves are not leading the people of Israel as they should? Why can't they see that they are saying "Yes!" to God but not doing the work God has asked of them? Perhaps the larger question is, why can't we see the same thing in ourselves? In what ways do we merely pay lip service to God and keep on doing what we want to do? In what ways do we substitute our beliefs *about* God for our obedient response *to* God?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that it is easy to get our beliefs mixed up with our actions. Surely, we can each name several folks who profess to love their families, but who spend very little time with them. We probably all know people who believe in protecting creation and the environment, and yet they drive vehicles that get less than thirty miles to the gallon and don't even think about recycling. We probably know even more who decry violence when it's in the headlines, and yet avidly play video games or watch programs and movies filled with violence.

There is a very peculiar and often large gap between what we believe and what we actually do. In churchy, theological terms, it's called sin. It's missing the mark, just as an archer's arrow misses the bull's eye and perhaps even the entire target. And while it seems inevitable, it is not acceptable or even tolerable for those of us who profess to love God. Fortunately, it's also forgivable.

This passage from Matthew challenges us to look beyond ourselves at the world, and to ask ourselves – and if we are really up to it, God – what should we, Jesus' followers, be doing that in turn challenges the leaders of this world with the Good News that Jesus is the world's rightful Lord? What should we be doing that will make the leaders of this world say, "By what authority are you doing that?" How do we imitate Christ, so that our actions, our words, our lives, leave no doubt about the authority of Jesus Christ, not just over us, not just over the Church, but over the whole world?

Soren Kierkegaard once said that Jesus wants followers, not admirers. Whether we say "yes" or "no" is less important to Jesus than what we actually do. The important part of our lives as Christians is what our lives say to the world. And the story that our lives tell others is probably just as easy for most people to read as the story that Jesus tells of the "Yes and No Brothers." Taylor says that it is really easy to tell which one of the brothers we are at any given time. Simply look in a mirror. Which is moving, our mouth or our feet?

May our "Yes" to God be yes, not just with our lips, but with all that we are and all that we have.
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