



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 21 (A)

Questions and Answers

[RCL] Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Someone with a lot of time on their hands once estimated that during his ministry, Jesus asked 307 questions, was asked 183 questions by others, and gave direct answers to only three questions.

John the Baptist asks Jesus early on in his ministry, “Are you the one we’ve been waiting for, or should we keep looking?” Then the chief priests ask Jesus one question after another. They ask about divorce; they ask about taxes; they ask about the role of the 10 Commandments and on and on it goes until finally, Jesus is standing in the court of the governor himself, as Pilate asks him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Questions asked but seldom answered are one of the defining characteristics of Jesus’ ministry. Matthew chapter 21 is no different. The chief priests and the elders were shrewd politicians, and they knew how to spring a rhetorical trap. What mattered to them wasn’t the right answer, but whether the answer served their purposes. They couldn’t make up their minds about how to respond to Jesus’ question, so they said, “We don’t know,” at which point Jesus launches into a parable.

Jesus tells of a father and his two sons. The father asks both of his sons to go to work in the family vineyard. The first son says something like, “Sure! I’ll get right on that!” But in the end, he doesn’t follow through.

We know what that’s like: we ask our spouse or child to take out the trash or empty the dishwasher, and they say, “Sure! I’ll get right on that, just as soon as halftime gets here...” or “Let me finish this chapter and then...” or “There’s only one episode left, but after that...”

If we’re honest, more than a few of us have surely been guilty of that response ourselves. We all know the first son because we’ve all made promises or commitments that, for whatever reason, we fail to keep.

But then there is the other son. This is the son who gets most of Jesus’ attention. Unlike his brother, he initially says he won’t help out in the vineyard but winds up doing so in the end. Now, we can ask all sorts of questions about why the second son changed his mind—preachers and Biblical scholars have been

doing it for centuries. But just for now, let's side-step that bit of homiletical quicksand and stay with the text that is before us.

The truth that this parable brings to bear has nothing to do with the second son's hesitation and everything to do with the fact that in the end, he showed up. In fact, the pattern of this parable is the pattern of our life with God. No matter what we've done, or what may have initially prevented us, God is always extending an invitation to us. We are constantly being drawn into a new place—to new depths of faith; to a new plane of divine discovery.

No matter if this is the first time we've ever heard the Gospel, or if we've been faithful Christians for decades, this parable lays bare one incontrovertible fact: God isn't finished with us yet! Although we might wish for God to say to us, "Okay, you've gone far enough; you can retire now and spend the rest of your days ensuring that the back pew doesn't float away," the truth is that the baptized life has no *emeritus* status.

In order to live into God's invitation, we must be willing to leave the past behind—no matter how comfortable or familiar or profitable—and turn toward the future, complete with all of its uncertainties and questions and anxieties.

And make no mistake: That's hard!

Consider, for example, the chief priests and the elders of Jesus' day. They had quite a bit invested in the *status quo*. Leaving the past behind meant forfeiting their claims to power and position, which had become their entire identity. Stepping into life with Jesus meant leaving all of that behind in favor of a future they couldn't predict and couldn't control.

One can't help but wonder if the first son had similar thoughts. After all, saying "yes" is the easy part—particularly when we don't pause to consider the costs. But actually doing the work? Actually showing up? That's a different story. God isn't satisfied with just letting things stay the way they are. There's always more work to do; more kingdom to build. And we hear that and we get excited, and we say, "Yes!" "Sign me up!" "That's what I want!"

But then reality sets in and we look around and we think, "Hmm. The *status quo* really isn't all bad... I make a decent wage—of course, I'm always ready to make more—but I make enough. My family has what they need to get by. My life is okay the way it is now. Besides, who knows if I'm going to like the work that God is calling me to? And more importantly, who knows if I'm going to get along with the other people who show up to work in God's vineyard? So, I know I said 'yes,' but I've had some time to think on it, and well..."

Then there's the other son. And for as much as preachers and scholars have wondered why he changed his mind, I can't help but wonder what made him say "no" in the first place. Could it be that he himself had been told "no" so many times that he thought himself unworthy?

When all you've ever known is oppression, why in the world would you trust that this time will be any different?

But God isn't like you and me. God doesn't take no for an answer.

Although institutions and structures and people do their best to wall off and box in, God is always breaking barriers and crossing lines and pushing boundaries to invite us to new and abundant life! The parable that Jesus tells is universal because at one time or another, every single one of us has found ourselves in that thin place between the relative ease and comfort of saying "yes" to God, and actually putting one foot in front of the other and walking along the rocky and dirt-paved path to the vineyard.

We're all caught somewhere between the excited "yes" of the first son and the slow conversion of the second son.

Much like the first son, we've all been fed one of the biggest lies ever told in the name of Christianity: That following Jesus would be easy.

And much like the second, we all know what it's like to feel as if too much has been asked and that it's too far to go.

But at the end of the day, one thing remains true: There's more kingdom to build, and God has put out the call to all who dare to join.

So I'm headed to the vineyard...

...I'll see you there.

Amen.

***The Reverend Dr. Marshall Jolly** is rector-elect of St. Thaddeus Episcopal Church & School in Aiken, South Carolina (Diocese of Upper South Carolina) and is currently packing boxes and boxes (and boxes!) of books to begin his move, alongside his wife and their nine-pound little Himalayan cat with a big personality, Hambrick.*