

# *Sermon: Pentecost XVI: Proper 21*

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Year A

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Psalm 25:1-9

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

It may have come a bit later for me than for others... but at the age of about thirty... I really started taking responsibility for myself... up until then... I too often held others accountable for the problems in my life... for the ways in which I hadn't been prepared to be "farther along in life" than I was then... part of this awakening... was that I met with a few other men... and we talked about our feelings... and I realized that I didn't have many... I had learned to squelch them... suppress them... because underneath some of them... was a truth... a feeling... that I really didn't want to face... it's like how I once said that when we opened the door at Passover... we really didn't want Elijah to be there... because that would mean that things really had to change... and I didn't want to face the feelings... the emotions... the energy in motion... because it would mean BIG changes in my life... and in my marriage... but if we believe that Jesus came to set us free... then he also came so we can stop keeping those mental ledgers... so we can stop pointing fingers...

In our reading from Ezekiel... we hear this sentiment echoed in the words of the people... it's not our fault... our parents have eaten sour grapes... and now our teeth have to be on edge... and God says... OK... I'll change things... it may be that your parents have done this or that... but now... only those who sin will be held liable for their actions... we can get caught up in discussions about inherited diseases... or multigenerational dysfunction... and whether that's consistent with God's change... but for Ezekiel... there was at least the insight that we could no longer blame our parents or ancestors for our circumstances... and that as adults... we can take a fearless moral inventory... and see who we are and who we're not... what our strengths are and what they're not... and own how we feel... and we can focus our attention on those things of

value... and leave behind those things which don't serve us well... and when we leave things behind... that's part of changing our mind... in Greek... it's called *metanoia*... and today's Gospel is about changing one's mind too...

The Temple leaders ask Jesus by what authority he's doing these things... by whose authority... they're probably asking for the name of his teacher... and what they're referring to... is that the day before... Jesus cleansed the Temple... he turned over the tables... and drove out the money changers... just who does he think he is...

Jesus' question to them... ups the ante... did the baptism of John come from heaven... or was it of human origin... John Shea writes... instead of answering the question honestly... they gauge how *whatever they say* will be received... their real concern is not about John's authority... but about their own... and they cannot answer Jesus's question without calling their own authority into question...

If they say John's authority was from heaven... they have to account for the fact that they didn't give credence to it... and if they say John's authority was of human origin... the crowds will turn against them... in either case... they don't look good... and looking good is essential... even the fact that they say they don't know... makes them look bad... they are religious authorities who ought to know...

Theologian Charles Campbell writes... even Jesus' question about John's authority... is essentially the same... as their question about his own... to identify one is to identify the other... in making a commitment about John's authority... the religious leaders would also be making a commitment about John's witness to Jesus... and thus to Jesus' authority...

So Jesus tells a parable about a man with two sons... and he asks them to go work in the vineyard... the first says no but does yes... the second says yes but does no... when Jesus asks them which of the two did the will of his Father... they said the first...

that would've been my choice too... but Jesus isn't interested only in the answer... but in how they got there...

The religious leaders... like many of us... value action over words... *doing* what the Father commanded is obedience to his will... but the first son also changed his mind... and Jesus wants to help the Temple leaders understand that it was a change of mind that brought the first son to obedient action... and both John the Baptist and Jesus have emphasized that *metanoia*... a change of mind... is needed to enter the Kingdom of God... and Jesus says the last will be first...

John Shea wrote: by profession... the chief priests and elders of the people are expected to be close to God... and by profession... tax collectors and prostitutes are thought to be far from God... but when the tax collectors and prostitutes heard John... they repented... they changed their minds and began to live in a new way... the chief priests and elders did not... Their endorsement of the first son... is a judgment on themselves... because they are the second son... who says yes... but does no... and they cannot change their mind...

I have a first cousin... who's seven months younger than I am... who can't change his mind... he lives in a dementia unit in Tijuana, Mexico... all throughout junior high and high school... he played rough contact sports... wrestling... football... boxing... he was raised in a family and a culture of male bravado... of being tough... and the medical community didn't know then... about the long-term effects of all of those concussive shocks to the brain... what mattered was winning... having authority... appearing strong...

We see this drive to maintain authority in the NFL and other sports... with its leaders having to answer similar questions... what did you know and when did you know it... and because of what the questions are... either knowing something... or not knowing something... can make you look bad... we see this in recent political gridlocks... when

there's no discussion about military action in Syria... even though it's required by law... because you'll either appear to have no authority... or you'll be thought of as sleeping with the other party... we see this in discussions about global warming... if you don't answer the questions... you aren't responsible... if you do... it's like when Elijah comes... lots of things have to change...

So we pretty much know what keeps people from changing their minds... authority... power... prestige... money... but what causes us... helps us... to change our minds... what allows for our hearts to be changed... to be broken open... what connects us to each other in ways that change both of us... one thing is the softening of hearts through relationship... and when we're in relationship it becomes easier to forgive... another is taking responsibility for who we are... knowing that any starting point is good enough for God...

In last week's reading from the Book of Jonah... we heard... *When God saw what they did... how they turned from their evil ways... God changed his mind... about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them... and he did not do it.* If God can change God's mind... if God can repent... turn away from... destroying an entire city... then how can we not... how can all people everywhere... of any religion or denomination... not change our minds from whatever takes us away from God... and choose those things which bring us closer... v. 11 of Ezekiel says: *As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked... but that the wicked turn from their ways and live... turn back, turn back from your evil ways... for why will you die, O house of Israel?*