

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2020
Matthew 21:23-32

“Go vs. No Go”

Again today, we hear a parable that Jesus told, and like last Sunday, it's about a vineyard. Last Sunday, we heard about the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), and today we hear about the parable of the two sons called to work in their father's vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32). The context here is that Jesus has entered into Jerusalem following his triumphal entry on that first Palm Sunday (Matthew 21:1-11). Almost immediately, Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem by driving out the moneychangers who had set up shop all around the temple precincts, as well as all who bought and sold for the people coming in to offer sacrifices for worship at the temple. All of this had transformed God's house from a house of prayer into a den of robbers ((Matthew 21:12-17). We can well imagine that both of these events – the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple – were met with stunned amazement as well as huge opposition by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. And now, in what we call Holy Week – that week between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday – Jesus has entered the temple precincts once again where he would encounter the religious leaders on their own turf. All of this afforded Jesus more teaching in the final days of his earthly life and ministry. And it all begins with that question that the chief priests and elders asked Jesus in the opening verse of today's Gospel lesson: **“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”** (Matthew 21:23). This exchange leads into the parable before us today, which becomes the basis for today's sermon under the theme, “Go vs. No Go.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

The parable which Jesus told is rooted in that question asked by the religious leaders: by whose authority are you doing these things? Who authorized you to ride into Jerusalem and stir up the people into a frenzy? The leaders did not regard Jesus on his own authority, but believed someone higher up – someone far more important – was that authority. In a sense, they were correct. Jesus was acting on the full authority of his Father (John 5:26-27; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10). That authority of Jesus as the Son of God was to forgive sins (Matthew 9:6; Mark 2:10) and cast out demons (Luke 4:36). It was in Jesus' authority that the kingdom of God had broken into the world (Matthew 4:12-17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:14-15). Jesus as the Son of God taught with authority, and not as the scribes and teachers of the Law (Luke 4:32). And just before his ascension into heaven, when Jesus charged his disciples with the Great Commission, he said to them: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...”** (Matthew 28:18). That divine authority from the Father to the Son is what's being questioned in today's Gospel lesson. In good Jewish tradition, Jesus answers their question with a question: **“The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?”** (Matthew 21:25). Answer this, Jesus said, and **“I also will tell you by what authority I do these things”** (Matthew 21:24). And the religious leaders cannot make up their mind about how to answer, and so Jesus answers for them. They get no answer. For them, it was no go. They are so close, and yet so far. They cannot see what God is doing in their very midst.

Jesus then tells this parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28-32). Any parent can relate to what Jesus says here, right? You ask your kids to clean their room, unload the dishwasher, bring their dirty clothes to be washed, etc. “Yup, I'll do it.” And then later you discover that nothing got done as you asked. Hmm... Go vs. no go. But it can cut both ways. The child who said they would did not, and the child who earlier gave you that major eye roll came through and did what you asked. Life is full of surprises! All of this comes down to Jesus' calling us to be not just hearers of his Word, but doers of his Word (Matthew 7:24; Luke 6:46-48; James 1:22). This is the point of that parable. When all is said and done, it's not what we say, it's what we do that matters. The religious leaders in Jerusalem represented the first son who said “go,” but didn't go to do the Father's will. They refused to receive the Son whom the Father had sent with

his authority. The outsiders, the people who lived on the other side of the tracks – the tax collectors and prostitutes – represented the second son who said “no go,” but repented and actually did go and do the Father’s will. They received and believed, not just John the Baptist, but the Son whom the Father had sent with his authority. And so we today are also called to receive and believe in Jesus.

Often in Jesus’ parables we find ourselves identifying with a specific person in that parable. Who do you identify with today? Is it the son who said he would go and work in the vineyard, but did not? Or is it the second son who initially told his father no, but then did go. It’s easy to think of the first son as a slacker who promised one thing and did another; who didn’t follow through. We don’t know why he didn’t go out to work after he said he would. Maybe he had the best of intentions, but was overtaken by events. It is easy to get caught up in things that may be pressing, but in the big picture of life, are not that important. So often in life, we are prone to the tyranny of the urgent, but what is urgent is not always what is important. Jesus calls us to what is of first importance: **“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”** (Matthew 6:33). And yet, even in our seeking God’s kingdom and his righteousness, we can easily fall off course and lose our way. We need help.

The good news is that there is another Son who didn’t say one thing and do another, but was fully obedient to his Father’s will. There was no question of go vs. no go with this Son. When his Father said, “Go,” he went and did all that the Father required of him. This Son is Jesus, whom the Father sent into his vineyard to work. And there within that vineyard, this beloved and obedient Son would be rejected by his own people, suffer and die on a cross in order that he might fulfill all of the Father’s will. All of this Jesus has done for you and for me – for all of us. He came to do what we, because of our weakness and sinful imperfection, could never do. Whereas we may be prone to say one thing and do another, with Jesus there is steadfast devotion and unwavering commitment, not only to the Father, but to his children who are called by his Name and baptized into his death and resurrection.

Strengthened by this Son’s life and salvation at work in us through his Word and Sacrament, we go forth to work in our Father’s vineyard. May Paul’s words from today’s Epistle lesson be fulfilled in each of our lives as we do so that good fruit might be borne in our lives – not fruits of the earth, but fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). **“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”** (Philippians 2:1-11). Amen.