

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“A Reluctant Yes”

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Matthew 21: 23-32

23 *When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’* ²⁴*Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.* ²⁵*Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?”* ²⁶*But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’* ²⁷*So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.*

28 *‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.”* ²⁹*He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went.* ³⁰*The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go.* ³¹*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.* ³²*For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.*

Philippians 2: 1-13

2*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,* ²*make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.* ³*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.* ⁴*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.* ⁵*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,* ⁶*who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,* ⁷*but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,* ⁸*he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

⁹ *Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name*

*that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

I was checking out a website this week entitled, "Mother of All Excuses." The site listed hundreds of excuses that people have used to avoid going to work, medical appointments, turning in homework, and attending worship. I thought I would share with you some of the interesting excuses why people don't attend worship services. "I just had this feeling that I shouldn't be there." How can you argue with that? "I've worked all week so I'm too tired to go." I think I've heard that one before. How about this one: "I'm too young. I'll go when I'm too old to have fun." There were some other excuses which I found slightly more humorous. "God made football..that about covers it!" How about, "They won't let me have a beer during the sermon." Then there is "I am allergic to unleavened bread." Here is a great excuse, "Church gives me gas." And finally this one is tough to dispute, "My cat is a prophet. I listen to him and he did not tell me to go to church."

We are all probably guilty of finding excuses to bow out of something that we don't want to do. One author describes those who find such reasons on a regular basis as "excusiologists." The perfect example of the excusiologist is the man who was asked by a neighbor if he could borrow some rope. "Sorry," the man responded, "I'm using it to tie up my milk." The neighbor said, "You can't use a rope to tie up milk!" "I know," said the man, "but when you don't want to do something, one excuse is as good as any other." Therein lies the philosophy for all excusiologists.

Perhaps the two sons about whom Jesus spoke in his parable this morning were excusiologists. The father asked one of the boys to do some yard work. "Sure Dad, I'll take care of it." Then he didn't do it. The second son said, "No way, Dad! I've got better things to do." Then later on he contemplates how his father really needed his help and he return home to do the work.

This particular parable has been used for years and years to teach us a lesson about the connection between word and deed. Simply talking the talk is inadequate. What really matters with God is what you do, not just what you say. Action is the appropriate measure of obedience.

I suppose that is a proper lesson for this parable. But it seems to me as if something more might be there, something that speaks to our human response to God's call upon our life. You see, in this parable there are no characters who say yes to their father and then do the work. And there are no characters who say no to their father and then not do the work. Neither son did what they said. Neither son was honest. Perhaps Jesus' point was not entirely about doing what you say or even about being honest with others.

There was once a certain youth group that planned a car wash on a Saturday morning. The money raised was to go to support a local mission. But when the alarms rang at the homes of the youth that Saturday morning, they were still recovering from Friday night's football game and post-game celebration. One young man reached over and turned off the alarm. He thought to himself, "How much will the rest of the youth group miss me today? I will make up for it someday. This is Saturday and I am tired." He rolled over and went back to sleep.

A young woman also heard the alarm go off. She was also tired but had actually been waiting for the hour to arrive. She looked forward to getting together with her friends at the car wash. It certainly beat being at home with her boring parents and bratty little brother. She didn't even know why the group was having a car wash but it didn't matter. Her friends were going to be there and she was going to have a good time.

Another young man heard the Saturday morning alarm. Then he remembered the promise he made to his parents. They told him that if he was going to get an allowance and the privilege of driving the family car, he needed to get up early and go work at the car wash. He really didn't want to go. But Mom and Dad were making it a requirement. He was obligated. He grumbled as he dressed for the day.

Finally a young woman awoke with a start. She had enjoyed the activities of the previous night. She so wanted to just go back to sleep. But she too remembered her commitment to the youth group car wash. She remembered why it was planned. She had once helped serve a meal at the local mission. She knew they needed the money. She felt it was important to help. The car wash was a perfect way for her to contribute. She wasn't happy to get out of bed so early, but she was willing to serve.

Which of these youths did the right thing for the right reason? Was it the one who said yes and then decided to sleep in? Was it the one who said yes and then eagerly came to work without knowing why she was working? Was it the one who said yes but worked only because he felt obligated? Or was it the one who said yes, even when she felt like saying no, because of the importance of the service?

I think we can agree that the focus of Jesus' story is the son who says no and then works anyway. But could it be that Jesus was trying to teach a lesson about authentic and faithful obedience to God. Can we show authentic obedience to God when we serve God by doing something easy, something that doesn't cost us anything, demand something from us, or impact our life in any manner? Do we show authentic obedience to God when we serve because it is a duty and we are afraid what will happen to us or what others might think of us if we do not serve? I think the answer to both of those questions is "no." Service in the Kingdom of God should not be a thoughtless carefree exercise. Nor should such service be an obligation done only under duress.

Rather, I think, we show more authentic obedience to God when we realize that God places before us many opportunities and calling. We have a choice in our response. We have decisions to make. We may not be eager about responding, yet we still might be willing. I think of it as the reluctant yes. We choose to follow God's intention not simply to make life easy for ourselves or to satisfy the demands of others. We serve because we have made a thoughtful sometimes difficult choice based on our faith in God.

Apparently, willingness is more important than eagerness when it comes to following God's intention. The first son was eager. The second was willing. There are times in which we would rather not be moved to uncomfortable service, when we might want to answer God's call with a quick "no," yet we still find some faithful reason to say "yes." In those times our commitment to God's way supersedes our human notions and feelings. Our commitments become our convictions.

Thinking that war would be a great adventure, John Gibbon's Black Hat Brigade went eagerly into their first battle of the Civil War, the Second Battle of Bull Run. There they fought well while losing many of their men, contesting Stonewall Jackson's gray-clad warriors. The historian of the regiment wrote in his journal these wonderful words of wisdom: "After reflecting upon our first battle, in the future we were ready to fight. We were never eager, but we were always ready."

Jesus does not ask us to be a disciple, to care for others, to turn our cheek, to give the shirt off our back, and to do the hard work of the building of the Kingdom of God because these are enjoyable tasks. He knows that as his followers, none of us will have a never-ending supply

of wisdom, or energy, or courage. When we say yes from a purely human impulse, our compassion is likely to be thin and easily worn away. Yet if we acknowledge the importance of the work and the change it will command from us, if we give the thoughtful and perhaps reluctant yes, we are more likely to serve effectively.

There is a story of an old monk who prayed every day for a vision from God to strengthen his faith. It never came. He had almost given up hope when one day, a vision appeared. The old monk was overjoyed. But then right in the middle of the vision, the monastery bell rang. It was time to feed the poor who gathered daily at the gates. It was the old monk's turn to feed them. He so did not want to go and leave his vision. But if he failed to show up with food, the poor would leave quietly, thinking the monastery had nothing to feed them that day. The monk wanted to say no. However before the bell stopped tolling, he made a decision. Willing, but not eager, he turned his back on the vision and went off to feed the poor. Nearly an hour later, the old monk returned to his room. When he opened the door he could hardly believe his eyes. There in the room was the vision, waiting for him. As the monk dropped to his knees in thanksgiving, the vision said to him, "My son, had you not gone off to feed the poor, I would not have stayed." Through his reluctant but faithful willingness to answer the call, the monk found his vibrant vision of God.

There are times in which we want to say no to God. There are moments in which we cannot be enthusiastic about the service of others that is set before us. We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that we are excited about what we have to do. We drag ourselves into the obligation of it. We follow out of a sense of duty. Sadly, this makes our desire for Christian service dry up very quickly.

I believe like for the second son, God desires for us a capacity to say no. If we first realize that we can say no, the yes we offer will not come from obligation or selfish motives. We will say yes and we will act, because we have been truly open to change, thoughtfully willing to serve and faithfully honoring God's intention. As Roger Lovette writes, "It is not always the one who talks or preaches or teaches who reflects the will of the Father. Sometimes it is the one who simply shows up ready to make the world a little better for Christ's sake."