

What do you think?

A man had two sons...

And Jesus tells us the tale of the sons and their father.

The father tells them to join the work-

One defies him openly, is downright rude (and then later thinks better of it)

The other says all the right things, but does none of what needs doing.

Neither son is very impressive, actually. I'm not sure I'd like to invite either of them to come live at our house!

One preacher has said,

“Wait a minute; I have two sons, and didn't we have our own reenactment of this precise parable last week, when I asked them to both to put away their laundry?!”¹ ‘Obviously, I need to print this story up and post it on our refrigerator right next to the list of chores. See, boys? We'll have no Pharisees in *this* house. It's tax collectors and prostitutes all the way.’

The Pharisees were the ones to whom the parable was told, they had been arguing about whether Jesus and his ministry were from God, whether he had any authority and where it came from.

And so he tells us a story- a story that we re-enact all the time, right here in God's own household, about what we say and what we do. If we are paying attention, we can recognize our brothers and sisters- and more to the point, *ourselves* in these descriptions.

What do you think?

Jan was a feisty, opinionated, and outspoken woman about 50 years my senior who sat in the 3rd row on the lectern side every Sunday. She hated, and I mean *hated* brass. Now, in this congregation, there was an elder who played trumpet and cornet, and another elder who played trombone, and there was a family that (when the adult kids were home) could muster up a whole brass quintet that was biologically related! Each of them had some friends who played, and so it was relatively easy and completely natural to invite them to come and play on festival Sundays- around Easter, for example or at Christmastime. Someone would play a descant on a hymn, or perhaps an offertory, bright and loud and joyful.

And Jan would complain bitterly- it was ‘shrill,’ it was ‘obnoxious,’ it ‘hurt the ears,’ it made it ‘impossible to worship.’ I can remember vividly the image of her- all 89 pounds of her- scowling viciously at the chancel from the 3rd pew, with her fingers jammed into her ears!! And how she would chew the pastors out afterward on the patio!

What do you think?

There were others, too, who remind me of the parable.

We ran a midweek program for school-age kids at the church, that included recreation, bible study, music, and a family-style dinner for all the kids who attended every week. It took an army of volunteers to make this thing ‘go’, and every year there would be someone who would be *soo* enthused about the program and *soo* positive, and they would sign up to be a table parent who would come each week and eat dinner with their 6 kids, and befriend them. And then week after week they would *forget*, or they would be *busy*, or they would be *tied up*... and there would be this table of kids, with no adult to pass the pasta or listen to their stories or play the table games with them. And I’d be scrambling around to try and find a solution.

What do you think?

This parable is about the Church, it’s about us.

And the truth is that much of the time we are failing to get the job done or failing to have a positive and willing spirit, or both!

One son says, “I’ll do it!” and then wanders off and does nothing of the kind.

The other son says “you can’t make me!”, and then relents and does what needs doing. Welcome to the Church!

It is not the most beautiful truth about the Church, but it is the truth nonetheless- this haphazard group is all we have to work with: we who say the wrong things or fail at what we’ve promised with great regularity.

We are the ones charged with the responsibility of continuing the ministry of Jesus on earth.

What do you think?

If you listened only to what Jan said on those festival Sundays- well, it wasn’t a pretty picture. But that was not the whole truth about her. Someone asked me once, when we were talking about how much she obviously hated

the brass accompaniment, 'I wonder why she doesn't just *stay home* on these Sundays?' The thought had never occurred to me- but I realized that I was not sure she could. Some combination of her faithfulness and her stubbornness meant that if it was Sunday morning, she was in the third pew, whether she liked what was happening that day or not. That same faithfulness and stubbornness made her widely known in the community- present as a conscience and a gadfly at every City Council meeting, an advocate for law enforcement and a particular friend of the K-9 units. When she died many years ago, I was astonished at the number of handsome, well-mannered young men in uniform at her funeral- along with their German Shepherd companions.

This parable is about us, and the truth that much of the time we are failing to get the job done or failing to have a positive and willing spirit, or both!

We are especially inclined, like the Pharisees, to say what it is that we think God wants to hear, or what we think the others who are listening want to hear- but it is easier to *say* the things that make for justice and mercy than it is to *do* them.

And this is why we need each other so desperately-

To keep holding out the possibility that our sharp words or our failed promises will not be the end of the story,

To keep holding each other accountable to live a life worthy of the gospel to which we have been called,

To keep reminding each other of **the Hope that dwells among us, and the Spirit who makes it possible for us to begin again, to be better than we are.**

We hold out hope for one another to try again, to redeem what we have said, or what we have left undone, to do it right the next time...

And it is in this kind of community-

Where we hold open the possibility of starting over, of trying again, of letting the Light of Christ shine in us

That we become what we are capable of being:

On our best days, we glimpse who we are and who God can help us to be:

The People who keep music playing in this community,

The People who feed the hungry.

The People who Welcome Children into God's house,
The People of the Peanut Butter.

One of the sharpest things Jesus says is at the end of the parable- that the Pharisees is that they would not change their minds....

**On our best days, we are
The Presbyterian Tax collectors and Prostitutes who let things change
their minds- and their hearts and their actions.**

The preacher I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon suggests that we print out this parable, and post it right next to the ministry opportunities. "See everyone? We'll have no Pharisees in *this* church. It's tax collectors and prostitutes all the way. Come on along."

¹ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching the Lesson*, Lectionary Homiletics vol. XIX, no.5, p.77