

CHANGING OUR HEARTS
Exodus 17: 1-7; Matthew 21: 23-32
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost • October 1, 2023
by Pat Berger

Which of those two sons do you think did his father's will? The father went to one son and asked him to work in the vineyard that day. The son said, basically, thanks for asking, but no thanks. (As an oldest, best behaved child, that makes me break out in hives . . .) Later, he changed his mind and he went to work. The father went to the other of his sons, put the same question: might you work in the vineyard today? And the son said, but of course -- and did not go. (Which also makes me break out in hives!)

So which did his father's will? Those to whom Jesus was speaking, the leaders of the synagogue, answered, the first: the one who said no but later went. Notice that Jesus doesn't tell them whether they had given the right response or the wrong one. We do get a hint, though: he tells them that the tax collectors and prostitutes would be ahead of them in line at getting into God's Kingdom. So: what do you think? Remember that the culture in which Jesus lived was one of honor and shame. Most likely, one son was more wrong or less wrong than the other, but neither was right. Saying "no" to one's father (especially if anyone else were to hear or learn of it) was at least as much of a shame to the father as would be saying "yes" and then not doing what one had agreed to do. Would it have been better for the father to have been publicly honored and privately shamed, or privately honored and publicly shamed? Neither would be our first choice. Perhaps both sons could do with some changing.

One way of working on this is to look at the Greek word in verse 29 that is translated as "changed his mind." Usually, another Greek word is used for changing one's mind; the word used here has more the meaning of "changing what one cares about," or "changing what one is more concerned about" -- so, changing one's heart. Verse 29, then, might as well have been translated, "He answered, 'I am not willing,' but later having a change of heart, he went." John the Baptist had

come to the religious leaders to whom Jesus was speaking, had spoken to them in the way of righteousness, and they had not believed -- their hearts had not changed; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes had believed -- their hearts had changed. It isn't all or only about saying or doing the right thing; it is about internal, heart, change.

Certainly this is what God is working at with the Hebrews in the desert in our first reading today. Earlier we read about the people being hungry, and God providing food for them -- food for forty years, until they came to Canaan. Every morning, their day's supply of manna would be waiting for them on the desert floor, and, well, that was really nice, but: we're thirsty, too. Couldn't they just trust God, though? Surely all of that manna and all of that quail, every day, would have got it into their heads or their hearts that this God was not like Pharaoh; this God was not like the Egyptian gods: this God would take care of their needs. Well, but, the Hebrews might reasonably say at that point: why does God need to wait until we think we are going to die from thirst before we can have something to drink?

Most of us have not had the experience of being really, REALLY thirsty and not having any idea where we might get something to drink. We are fortunate to live in a place in the world where water is plentiful, and clean drinkable water is plentiful. So we can read these words from the Exodus, but knowing the thirst the people felt -- we just need to imagine. They were r-e-a-l-l-y thirsty. And the God who made the waters move away when they needed to cross the sea to escape from Egypt was the same God who was with them when they were thirsty, and if Moses and some of the elders would only go to the rock at Mount Horeb -- the word Horeb means dry -- if they would only go to that rock, God would be there. And if Moses would strike that rock with his staff, water would come out of that dry rock, and there would be plenty for everyone to drink. Moses did. God did. Water came. People drank. And think about the name that Moses gave this rock: not God is here, or God gave us something to drink: Moses named this rock Massah, which means test, and Meribah, which means quarrel -- reminding the people of who they were, as well as whose they were.

They weren't apt to forget that water came from a rock; they might forget how thirsty they were.

We come here today, on this communion Sunday, we come here hungry and thirsty. And this is not only communion Sunday -- it is World Communion Sunday! All over the world, Christians are celebrating communion today, celebrating that there is the bread of life for us, the cup of salvation for us. Imagine the changes that could happen in our world if all who are taking communion this day could go out to live as Jesus would have us live, to live as if the promises made to all of us in the gospels are for everyone. Imagine if encouragement or consolation or sharing or compassion or sympathy we have received and others have received because of Jesus' presence in all of our lives, imagine if all of us, all of us were to share that -- the difference it would make in our world. I heard that the church where I was in Gresham now shares its space with three hispanic congregations and a Kenyan congregation, and today, because of World Communion Sunday, they are all worshiping, taking communion, together! There's a start! Hearts will be changed.

Think of the hearts you change, by being here on Sunday morning, by putting your check and your coins into the offering plate, by being a good neighbor, by all the many things you are and do. And none of our hearts are ever changed enough. Listen for what your heart might say: what is one thing you might do or say today or this week that might help to change someone's heart, to let someone or many someones know that you know God is taking care of you and will take care of them, too? Because God does. God does.

Let us pray.