

Sermon 17th Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 21], Yr. A
“Chronic mind-changers”
Matthew 21:23-32

Pray: Lord, bless this time and open our hearts to your Word for us today, Amen.

Sometimes, sad as it is, our words can be like wind, can't they? We say one thing and do another, *or*, we make promises but then fail to keep them.

In Jesus' parable today, the father asked something fairly straight forward of his son. He asked him to go and work in the family business, a vineyard. It was like any other job that parents might ask of their children. *“Please clean your room; please do the dishes; ...wash the car; ...take the bins out...”* Parents politely ask their children to do things all the time. And this father addresses his son in a most tender and affectionate way, using a term of endearment: *“My Son... my boy... my child...”* *“Son... go and work today in the vineyard.”* It's not unreasonable. His father is not demanding, or harsh or rude. It is a simple request, spoken in love. *“Go and work today in our family business, you are needed.”*

Although his son responded in a way that was less than respectful. Perhaps it was on his day off, we are not told. He's pretty blunt in his reply, *“Get real! No way Dad,”* almost with the effect (I apologise), *“Get stuffed old man! I won't!”* He'd probably been working all week and had things he wanted to do... YouTube, Social Media to catch up on, or an epic video game to play. Either way, he didn't want to do any work today. So he turned away, went into his room and shut the door. Surprised and a little saddened at the response, the father stood there for a moment and let the insult sink silently into his heart. *“Okay, I will ask my other son.”* But only half an hour later, the son, left with his thoughts as he played his video game, started to feel bad for how he spoke to his father who loved him so. His father wasn't really asking too much, *“It's our family business after all. It's how we have food on the table, a home, and how I can enjoy my video game. I can always do this another time. And, what I said was shameful...”* So, he changed his mind, put on his work clothes, and went to work in the vineyard.

Meanwhile, the father approached his other son. In the same loving way, he also asked him to go and work in the family vineyard. This time the response is much more favourable. *“Sure, Dad. I'll go to work right away, sir.”* In fact, he replies in a most respectful way that is due his father. His father smiled, put his hand on his son's shoulder, and gave him a squeeze of silent approval and love. He went away thankful he had *at least one* obedient son. As it happened, his second son *also* changed his mind. As he looked out the window he thought about working *all* day while everyone was enjoying the weekend – with the dirt and sweat and the hot sun – and said, *“Who am I kidding? Forget it! It's too hot today. Besides, it's the weekend. My brother's not out there, so why should I be? Anyway, my friends want*

me to hang out with them today instead.” ...Two sons. One rudely said “no,” then changed his mind. The other willingly and respectfully said “yes,” and changed his mind.

Every day we have the potential to change our minds in our decisions or commitments – sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Every day we’re faced with keeping or breaking the promises we make. We only have to think about to how we make and break promises to our loved ones. Or, to think about how we make and break our promises to the Lord to be servants in His vineyard, and how life, our own desires, or other priorities easily get in the way. How often do we take the easy way out?

We make decisions about how faithful we’re going to be to God: ‘to worship or *not* to worship, that is the question!’; to give our money, our talents or our time, or not give them. Every day we’re faced with how much we’ll let Jesus shape how we act toward others. We face the question of, how will Jesus call me to work in His vineyard today? Or, ‘How will we put our faith into action today?’ ‘Do not merely be hearers of the word, but doers as well,’ says Saint James (James 1:22). As Christians, what choices are we going to make? How will we fight against temptation, instead of flirting with it? Sometimes we say “yes,” to our Heavenly Father, sometimes “no,” and often we change our minds either way.

Sometimes we are like the first son. He said “No.” He knew what his father wanted, and yet he rudely and willingly went against his wishes. He may initially have enjoyed saying “no” to his father? It may have given him a sense of ‘being his own man.’ Perhaps he wanted independence or to rebel against established authority or to ‘stick it to the man,’ as they used to say. Sadly, he brought shame, insult, and hurt to his father in the process. But later on he thought about his choice. This was his *father*. As much as he didn’t want to do the work or to obey his father, the son remembered all that his father had done for him, and he changed his mind. The word Jesus used is that this son “repented.” He had a total change of heart and attitude and turned away from the wrong he had done and sought to make it right. He turned around 180 degrees from the path he’d chosen and walked in the way that was right and pleasing, which gave honour to his father once more.

Sometimes we are like the second son. Though he willingly said “Yes,” he had a change of mind as well. He also brought shame, insult, and hurt to his father but by what he failed to do in *following through* with his promise. Yes, both sons brought shame to their father, particularly in their cultural context. It is similar to Jesus’ parable about *two other* prodigal sons and their father in Luke 15. Both of the sons in today’s parable had a change of mind. Each made a decision; each thought about it; then each purposefully changed his mind.

When Jesus came, some of the people you'd expect to believe in Him, like the Elders, Chief Priests, Scribes and Pharisees, those 'righteous' people who should have said "yes" to Him as the Christ, really said "no." They didn't believe in Him as God's Son or trust in His authority from God. Yet others, like the tax-collectors and prostitutes, who you'd think would say "no" to Jesus because of their 'unrighteousness,' ended up believing and trusting in Him as the Christ after all. They repented of their sin before God, but those who were 'righteous' did not.

We know what it's like to change our minds when it comes to God, don't we? Our Heavenly Father has asked us to go and live Christ-like lives in our world. He's earned the right to be called 'our Father' by buying us back from sin and death by the blood of His Son, and bringing us into a new life, a new family and a new relationship with Him. He's asked us to be holy (*set apart*) from the world. He's asked us to reflect His Son to everyone we meet, and to be His image in our broken world. And we say, "Yes, sure Father. I'll do as you ask of me." Then, too soon after our prayer, our Bible Study or worship, we go back to our old ways. If you like, we take off our 'Sunday clothes' and put back on our old clothes with our old ways. Our renewed passion to be faithful disciples sometimes blows away with the wind. Our respectful prayers, praises and promises to God reflect the second son instead. "Sure, God. I'll be faithful to you." Although we don't get too much further than that. God knows exactly how we are.

Well, Jesus our Lord knows what it's like for us to struggle with what God the Father asks. In truth, His parable reminds us that none of us are perfect servants of God. And yet, *thankfully*, in eternity, God the Father spoke to *His Son* about the work that needed to be done. Perhaps it went something like this: "Son, I love you. But I've got a very difficult job for you to do. I need you to go to work on earth. I need you to take on flesh and blood like my people. I need you to live in a sinful world, with suffering, evil and brokenness. I need you to heal, preach, and teach of my Kingdom. Then I need you to be beaten, whipped, abused, mocked and crowned with thorns, even though you will have done nothing wrong. And, I'm sorry to ask you to do this – but I need you to die in their place. Will you go and work in my vineyard?" [adapted E.Grimenstein]

The job was terrible. But we can imagine Jesus looking at His Father and saying, "Yes, Father, I'll do as you ask." What His Father asked was difficult beyond our understanding, and we know Jesus struggled with the cup His Father asked Him to drink (Matt. 26:42). At any point along the road of suffering to the cross He could have changed His mind, but, He never did. "Father, not my will, but your will be done," He prayed (Matt. 26:39). He was both respectful *and* obedient. He stuck with what the Father asked Him to do. He went in humility to die for a largely ungrateful and disrespectful humanity. Why? Because Jesus knows us, and knows we will fail to live as our Heavenly Father asks.

We are 'chronic mind-changers' because of sin. Sometimes we'll be like the first son who said "no," then did the right thing. Sometimes we'll be like the second who said "yes," then did the wrong thing. We will find ourselves caught up in temptations or choices that bring hurt and pain to ourselves or those we love. We'll find ourselves knowing what's right, then doing the opposite. It will happen – Saint Peter knew it all too well (Matt. 26:75).

But there is hope. We're not alone. We've been baptised *into Jesus*. Saint Paul reminds us in Philippians 2 of Jesus' resolve to do the Father's will, even unto death (v.1-13). Jesus never brought shame upon His Father. Because of His obedience, we are forgiven our wrongs. And, if we let Him, He will guide us through our days of decision and trial. So, let Him speak to our hearts and remind us each day of what He has done for us upon the cross. Let us not be afraid to give up our old ways, to turn and repent of them, and instead receive His forgiveness and new life. Let us be strengthened by His Body and Blood. Let His promises encourage us; His love transform us; and His Spirit fill us once more for He has *done everything* for us that is needed.

Although we'll change our minds time and again, Jesus will remain faithful to us. He will always keep His promises. And, most of all, Jesus *will never* change His mind about us. *Thanks be to God! Amen.*