

Sermons at Christ Church

Bound To Christ in Love and Hope.

Pentecost 18

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“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.” Jesus said to the chief priest and elders. This response from Jesus got me thinking about the things we often tell ourselves, and the fact that what we tell ourselves drives our relationship with ourselves, others and God.

In the earlier part of today’s gospel, Jesus had made a triumphant entry into Jerusalem and had driven out those who were buying and selling in the temple. The chief priest and elders who profited from the temple trade, wanted to know from Jesus who it is that gave him the authority to do what he did.

Jesus answered their question with a question. And when they couldn’t answer the question, he went on to tell them a parable about a father who asked his two sons to work in the vineyard. The first son declined to go but he later changed his mind. The second son accepted the request but changed his mind and didn’t do the work. After telling the story, Jesus asked them, between the two sons, who did the will of the father. They said the one who changed his mind and did the will of the father.

Hear what St. Paul said, let the same mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus. That mind which does the will of the father. That mind which can decline the father’s request and then turn round to do the father’s will.

That mind which is about action and not words. That mind which constantly reminds the self that our relationship with God is about what I do and not what I say, that mind which says, judge me by what I do and not what I say because what I say may be empty words.

Jesus goes on to make this crucial point, tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners, people who were deemed to be undeserving of the kingdom of God have gained access into the kingdom because of the change of mind. These people told themselves something different about themselves.

What do we tell ourselves? I believe that what we tell ourselves shapes the direction we go or the path we decide to walk. What we tell ourselves determines how we react to people and situations.

What we tell ourselves about God nurtures our relationship with God. What we tell ourselves depends on the extent to which we even listen to ourselves.

I believe that there is this unique and unparalleled benefit of listening to ourselves. It doesn't mean that our thoughts and minds would never be clouded by different things, but a patient listening to the self is what makes any change in us inevitable, possible and lifegiving.

Hear me out, if there is ever going to be any change in us, we must first begin to listen to ourselves, we must hear ourselves tell ourselves not only of our need for redemption but to be obedient enough to do the father's will.

I believe that prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners who listen to themselves hear within them that unique cry for redemption. They hear the invitation that there is a place for them, they learn that the forgiving God who is full of mercy and compassion offers us not one more chance but several opportunities to change our minds and make a turn.

I once heard that sometimes that which makes us cry, that which makes us confront ourselves, that which collapses our knees and sends us crushing to the floor, those super uncomfortable moments are the moments we should be thankful for because those are the moments that carry the potential to unlock something fundamental and life transforming inside of us.

Those are the moments that we experience an epiphany which opens our eyes to see ourselves in a new way. Those are the moments that we experience our need for God and our need to change our minds. Those are the moments when we decide to make a turn from whatever it is that has taken us captive and turn to God. We turn to God and do the father's will, not only because we have had a change in mind, but we have come to find out that it is only in God that we can find the fulfillment we need.

I have never met a sinner who isn't interested in redemption. I have never met a drug addict who isn't interested in being clean. I have never met an alcoholic who isn't interested in being sober.

Every Saturday afternoon men and women gather at the parish hall to share their experiences with alcoholism and seek help from each other. They end their meetings with the Lord's Prayer. I don't know how many of them are people of faith or attend church regularly, but the profound nature of that act alone isn't lost on me.

Whenever I hear them offer that prayer, I hear echoes of what the psalmist said, "Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long."

Whenever I hear them offer the prayer, I don't hear of a belief in a doctrine, I hear of a people who believe that it is only God who can save them. That is what they tell themselves and they believe it.

I once heard a story of a retired hedge fund manager who decided to work among prostitutes and addicts in the Bronx. He wrote that it was among the prostitutes and addict that he sensed God's deep presence because the danger involved in their lifestyle meant that they always had to rely on God to pull them through.

I can hear the prostitute cry in the dark corner of her room-I don't want to meet another stranger tonight-this body belongs to God. I can hear the alcoholic beat himself or herself up, I don't need another drink. I can hear the drug addict cry out-save me, save me, help me, help me. I can hear the sinner in me lament over my sins, my sins are too many to count so wash me, wash me with hyssop and I shall be whiter than snow, wash me with the blood of the lamb so I may not sin against you. These are what we tell ourselves about ourselves because of our change of mind.

There is a story of a man who fell in a deep dry well and cried for help. The man asked for help from a lawyer who stopped by the well. The lawyer gave him his business card and said, give me a call when you come out and we will sue the idiot who dug the well.

He asked for help from a doctor who stopped by. The doctor asked him to come to the emergency room when he comes out of the well because he cannot bill him.

A third man stopped by, and when the guy asked for help, the man also jumped into the empty well. The guy who was stuck in the well became furious. I asked for help. I didn't ask you to jump into the well with me. And then the man said, I jumped in because that is how we can both save ourselves.

We cry for help because we know we cannot help ourselves by ourselves-the prostitutes who believed in John knew they couldn't help themselves, the tax collectors who believed in John knew they couldn't help themselves and each sinner who believes know that they cannot help themselves. To help themselves, they have to change their minds about themselves.

It is this knowledge that forms the basis of any potential change in our lives. The moment we tell ourselves that we cannot help ourselves, we open ourselves up to the change that is available to those who desire a transformed life. What do you tell yourself?

There is a book by Kamal Ravikant "Love yourself like your life depends on it." In the book Kamal argues that you have to constantly tell yourself that you love yourself. It is difficult process, but the strange thing is that that is how personal growth happens.

That is how you are able to change your mind about yourself-you listen to yourself and remind yourself that you love yourself because God has shown you what it means to love. What do you tell yourself about yourself?

We just began our stewardship season. This is the time of the year when we are all encouraged to prayerfully consider a pledge to support our common life in God. I want you to know that whenever I talk to you about giving, I do so with a deep sense of appreciation and gratitude for the life and treasure that each of you pour into this community of faith. It is amazing.

I also know that it is not always easy, especially because of life's difficulties. But we commit ourselves to the difficult process of giving, not because of what's in it for us, but because of what God has done for us and continues to do in our lives. We commit ourselves to this difficult work because of what we tell ourselves about God.

The point of the gospel is, if people are having a change of mind, it is not only because of what they have come to believe it is also because of what they are telling themselves about God to themselves. What are you telling yourself about yourself?

Whatever it is that you tell yourself, may you tell it with the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Tell it with an obedient mind that seeks to do the will of God the father.

Amen.