

## Monday Morning Faith

Matthew 21:23-32

We sing, "All to Jesus I surrender All to Him I freely give." We confess, "I believe in God the Father, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord." We pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

And that's all wonderful on a Sunday morning. But do we live up to those Sunday morning promises on Monday morning? Or do all the verbal commitments we make through hymns, prayers, and confessions on Sunday get packed away as we go about living our lives the rest of the week?

**We have this knack, you and I, to divide the world into THEM and US** – the unsaved and the saved, the sinners and the saints, the outsiders and the insiders. Maybe one reason we come to church is to be reassured that, despite our occasional moral lapses, we're really not bad people.

Certainly we're in better standing with God than THEM – those folks who don't come to church. WE are on the inside --THEY are on the outside, and like good Christians on the inside WE'LL pray for THEM.

But then we meet or hear about people outside the church whose lives and actions are more Christian than those who claim to BE Christian, and our neat categories of "US" and "THEM" gets rearranged, doesn't it?

And we've all seen or known church goers whose Monday morning actions make a mockery of what they said in church on Sunday morning. When our Monday morning life appears to be totally unrelated to our Sunday morning affirmations, folks who don't go to church have to wonder if faith would make any difference in their own lives.

And parables like the one Jesus told in our text for today tend to make us uncomfortable about our assumptions about our faith. A parable, if we allow it to work, can shock us into seeing things in a whole new light.

Look at today's parable: A father had two sons, and he said to them, "Come and help me harvest the grapes." The first son said, "Absolutely Dad" and then didn't help.

The second son said, "No way, Pops" but then changed his mind and went into the vineyard and helped.

Jesus then asks his listeners to decide which of the two did the will of his father. Most of us would answer that the one who said no initially but then rolled up his sleeves and went to work is the one who did his father's will. But if you examine the parable, BOTH sons disobeyed their father, didn't they? And although we may still choose the one who initially said no, then changed his mind, the parable doesn't say which one the father favored, does it? We may even find ourselves identifying with one son or the other in the story, but that doesn't mean that the father chose one and rejected the other, does it? Well, then how are we supposed to learn anything from studying the parables? If there's no clear-cut right or wrong answer to these questions Jesus asks, how is that supposed to help us grow in our faith?

Well, **there are some things in life, often the most important things, that you can only learn by doing them.** You can't really learn to dance just by hearing a lecture on modern dance, can you? You've got to get on the dance floor, feel the beat of the music, and move to the rhythm, don't you? At least, that's what I've heard.

The Christian faith is sort of like that. You've read books and heard lectures on the Christian belief. You've attended Discipleship classes and joined discussions at Kirk Night. But reading books and attending lectures and sitting in on a class or presentation of the Christian faith is worthless until you practice the Christian faith.

Christianity is not some sort of philosophy of life, like Zen Buddhism or transcendental meditation. Christianity is not some set of intellectual propositions to either accept or reject. And Jesus was NOT some philosopher who came to lay out a new system of disembodied beliefs that didn't really mean anything unless you believed them.

Jesus was a teacher, and his textbook was his life. And when we identify ourselves as Christians, we're not making a commitment to accept the dogma and doctrine of the religious establishment, we're making a commitment to love and FOLLOW Jesus, not simply because of what he said, but because of what he DID, and IS DOING and WILL DO for those who accept the his invitation to follow him.

And everyone who accepts that invitation embarks upon a life-long journey with Jesus, not just toward Jerusalem and Calvary, but toward the ultimate truth, toward a way of life we cannot find any other way except by following Jesus.

**You know, sometimes I wonder if we might be misleading folks by the way we worship** on Sunday morning. I mean, look at a typical Sunday morning. Most of our worship is sitting and listening, isn't it?

You sit and listen while I make the announcements. You sit and listen while someone reads the scripture passage for the day. You sit and listen while I talk to the children for a few minutes. You sit and listen while I offer the pastoral prayer. You sit and listen while the choir sings the anthem. You sit and listen, or sometimes nap (don't think I can't see you from here) while I preach the sermon.

Does all this sitting and listening give people the wrong impression about the Christian faith – that it's mostly a passive thing rather than an active thing?

Years ago at a conference for preachers the speaker asked the group: "What do you look for when you hear a sermon?" The person who responded first said she wanted to hear a sermon that helped her think about things in a new way." Heads nodded in agreement, my own among them.

Because at the time that sounded okay. But the more I think about the question and about preaching, the less I am convinced that preaching could be to help folks "think about things in a new way".

We love to THINK about sermons, to turn ideas over in our minds, then go out and have a good lunch and forget about them. We THINK, we FEEL, but often see no need to act. These days I believe a good sermon ought to help us LIVE a new way.

No sermon, as good as it may be, amounts to anything unless it motivates people to ACT on what they've heard, allowing the Spirit of God to transform you into a new creation. Hearers who become doers so that the faith proclaimed with Sunday morning affirmations is evident in Monday morning lives.

Now, most of us come to church expecting to have what we already know and believe confirmed and validated. We like talking with people we've known for a hundred years. We enjoy the familiarity of this sanctuary that holds so many memories for us. We love to sing those hymns we've sung since childhood.

With so much that threatens us, with the world changing so quickly around us, here, on Sunday morning, in the church, we encounter that old time religion, a solid rock on which to stand and we're comforted and strengthened.

But there are other times when God knows that we need to have our thinking challenged, our faith examined, and our lifestyle called into question. And while we take pleasure in seeing that happen to somebody else – to THEM – there are times when the focus needs to be on US.

Once there was a father who had two children. One day he said to them, "Come and follow me, for there is much work to be done today." The first said, "Absolutely" but didn't go. The second said, "No way" but ended up obeying.

Ask yourself, which one am I? AMEN