

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost
October 1, 2017
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

As the preacher on a day when we're having a pet blessing, I have to be particularly aware of what I'm walking into at the later service.



Given the “change” (as it were) in my congregation for this Sunday, I have to anticipate the restless bodies, squirming and longing to be free; I have to be prepared for extra noise; I have to anticipate an inability to sit still for long periods of time, let alone pay attention to me.

And the same might be said about the dogs, too!

There's another thing they say about dogs. They say you can't teach them an old dog a new trick. Well, I'm here to tell you, it ain't necessarily so. I heard of someone recently who proudly announced, “I just taught my 15 year-old German Shepherd to play dead! And that dog's trying to set a record too ... been that way for eight hours now.”

You can't teach an old dog new tricks. That's what they say about old dogs.

And the same might be said about humans, too!!

Our gospel this morning is a study on how humans, like old dogs, don't take so easily to learning new tricks. In this case, the chief priests and elders are the “old dogs,” and Jesus the “young pup” who presumes to have a thing or two to teach them. They object. They criticize. They challenge. And that's why they're questioning his authority. It's their job, after all, at least as they see it, to keep folks in their proper place. Make no mistake, theirs is not an innocent question.

Jesus, of course, uses their own question about authority against them. And his question isn't innocent either. Jesus must have known the spot he'd put them in. They cannot answer without losing credibility. Either they'll come off looking hypocritical for failing to give John credit in the first place, or they'll antagonize those who responded to John's preaching in the wilderness, who went out to the River Jordan because John told them they could start all over again!

Their failure to answer a simple question is one of the ways Jesus rebukes them. And the story Jesus goes on to tell next is another. It's his way of pressing home the point.

It's a simple little tale, nothing very complicated. And yet, for all that, it's full of unanswered questions. We know what happened – how it is that each of them ended up acting contrary to their initial responses – but we're never told what changed one "no" to a "yes," or turned the other "yes" to a "no." We don't know what may have enticed the one who refused to go at the start to reconsider and go out to work in the vineyard anyhow. And we don't know what may have prevented the other one from following through on a promise to go ... or whether the promise to go was even sincere when that promise was first made.

In this case, I don't think these questions or their answers matter. I think Jesus' point, in the end, is something along the lines of "what's been said and done in the past has been said and done, let it be; pick up the pieces and start again." That's the first, and maybe most important, point.

But there are other questions that are not answered for us, and I think these questions deserve some of our time as well. We don't know anything about how the family in Jesus' story got along beforehand, but we might imagine because we do know something about how our own families work ... for good and for ill. We know how members within a family get along with each other over time and we know something about the roles they fill. I know enough about family systems to wonder if each of the siblings had an established track record. I wonder if each of the two siblings in this story were locked into their respective parts: one of them the child who always said the right things; and the other the proverbial "black sheep."

If this is a story about how two siblings interact with each other and how they plug into the family, each of them locked into their assigned roles and a perpetual pecking order, then the story says that all comes to an end. Old roles need not drive new possibilities. That's not unlike my first point about letting go of the past and starting over again, but it's a bit more pointed.

Because if that's what the story is about, I can see how it's simultaneously good news for some – the tax collectors and the prostitutes, of course – and not so good news for others – most especially, the chief priests and the elders. It's a rebuke of them.

And I think that, in its own context, this story hints that, for all their presumption of superiority, the chief priests and the elders are actually more like the tax collectors and the prostitutes than they imagine. That's how the story puts the chief priests and elders in their place. Jesus tells it, I think, to rebuke those "old dogs" who refuse Jesus' "new trick."

And yet I think maybe Jesus also tells the tale with the wild hope that maybe they'll learn something from him all the same. You see, the story Jesus tells is set deeply in the culture of his time, a culture of honor and shame. And in that light, both of the two sons insult their father. Even if the first son turns around and goes out to the vineyard in the end, he'd already mouthed off and brought shame on the family. The neighbors would talk in the village square. And the second son's failure to follow through on a promise will only give the neighbors more reasons to gossip about a family with no honor.

The kids in this family aren't all that different from one another; both of them needed to clean up their acts. The only real advantage one of them had over the other is that one decided not to miss the chance to let go of the past and move into a new future.

But when the short story is over, there's still a chance to write a new one ... or at least to add a new chapter. What's to stop the one who said "yes," but then didn't go out to the vineyard, from reconsidering once more and returning to the vineyard after all?

After all, what's true for tax collectors and prostitutes must surely be true for chief priests and elders, as well: no matter what they have done, no matter what may have been done to them, the future is still open for them too. They need not settle for that which has never really been life-giving for them or for their siblings.

And what's true for tax collectors and chief priests, for prostitutes and elders is also true for us. And that's probably both a hard truth and good news for you and me, as well. It means we're not done, not any of us ... because God is finished with us, not any of us. And no matter what we have done, no matter what may have been done to us, the future is still open.

I'm not asking anyone to tell tales today, but my guess is most of you know which sibling in Jesus' story is closest to your own story. You've done things you should never have done or you've left undone the things you should have done. You've always been the kind of person who says the right thing – never mind, for now, whether you held true to your word or not – or you regret the things you've said, regretting the ways you've put your foot in your mouth more times than you count. You were always the problem child – more than a little resentful of your responsible sibling – or you were the good kid, a bit smug about being better than others.

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks." That's what they say. But then, of course, most old dogs already know more about all of this than do we. They don't have to be told to love tax collectors and prostitutes; they mostly just love the next neighbor they meet. It never occurs to them to turn up their nose to another; that's not what noses are for!

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks." But we're not old "dogs." We're human beings and children of a God who showers all of us with love and new opportunities to do the same. We old humans have something to learn still. And thankfully, we still have time to learn ... so long as we can hear stories and see our sisters and brothers and our own selves in them.