

September 27, 2020

In the name of our triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Good morning, thank you for having me here, and allowing me to speak with you this morning, in your beautiful sanctuary—the first sanctuary I’ve been in since March, and it feels nice.

I moved to Boston for Graduate School in 2001. In those days (which don’t seem too long ago, but my 20-something classmates assure me IT IS), Boston was deep into the construction project that had come to be known as the “Big Dig.” It was a major reshuffling of the highways that run through town to support more local traffic. Or at least, that was what they kept telling us, as we got lost, over and over again, going to places that we THEORETICALLY knew how to get to. But that’s the thing, as with driving, with much of life—things become automatic. I know in my body exactly how far it is to that next exit. I don’t have to think about whether it’s a left exit or a right exit. I just drive. Except when there’s a Big Dig, and the exit that was on the right last week is suddenly on the left. There was even one notable evening when I lost an HOUR following “detour” signs that had been badly placed—all they did was lead me in a 2 mile loop, over and over again until I got wiser. (My 20 something classmates might be right, because of course, in 2001, I did not have GPS in my car, I did not have a smart phone—I did not have a phone of any kind in the car!) When the landscape shifts suddenly, we can have a really hard time changing our established patterns of behavior, even a behavior so trivial as exiting a highway.

Well, church, change is hard! Especially change that comes after long established practice. Each one of our readings today is pointing us to that hardest kind of change, the kind that we humans fight tooth and nail to avoid. That is changing our minds and hearts, and spirits) *because we are wrong.*

In Ezekiel, the prophet tells us, “when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life.” And of course, part of me wants to say, well... sure. SURELY to stop doing wickedness and start doing right is... good. But there are very few people who walk around doing wickedness and also acknowledging that they are doing what’s wrong. We trick ourselves into believing that whatever we’re doing is right. So in order to turn away from wickedness, we must first notice that we have turned into it in the first place. And

then we must admit, even if only quietly to ourselves, Yup, that was the wrong thing. I had best not do any more of that wrongness. “says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.”

This week, Jesus enters into the temple and starts teaching. Jesus’ entry into the temple changed the landscape. Jesus upended many of the things that people were accustomed to believe, and do, and practice. The chief priests and elders didn’t know what to make of him. You don’t get to be a chief priest or an elder overnight. There are years of formation, molding, teaching, learning, studying that go into becoming a chief priest or an elder. And Jesus is terrifying them. They want to retreat into their automatic behaviors, their known paths. Their blinker is on and they are looking for the exit that was supposed to be coming up on the right! And Jesus knows this. He knows that they’ve come at him with their learned question: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” What they want is for Jesus to quote scripture, or cite some source that they will be able to tear down, because remember, Chief Priests and Elders! They know their scrolls! For any passage Jesus might invoke, they will have another one at the ready to contradict him. And Jesus also knows this. And he doesn’t want to get into a heady argument about the details of the law. In just one chapter further in Matthew, on the very same day as today’s scene, Jesus will give us the words we still use to begin the Rite 1 Eucharist service: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Jesus’ understanding of the law and the prophets is not an understanding built on studying every word and every shade of meaning—it is built on an understanding of the heart of the law. And what he knows is that the people he is talking to, these chief priests and scribes, they have heard the heart of the law, and they have refused to change their minds, and believe.

We can cause all sorts of problems when we “dig in.” We dig in our heels and refuse to move, refuse to check in with our values and see if what we are doing really, really comports with our values, with our deep values, with the values that undergird all the other things that we hold to be dear and true. Are you loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind? ARE YOU loving your neighbor as yourself? Have you come to believe in a new way but are not letting yourself act on it? Well, here we are again—changing your mind, your heart, and your soul, that is hard.

So, I'm going to let you in on a practice of mine that I learned many years ago, and has helped me in more ways that I could ever count. It's a little counterintuitive, but let's try it. Here it is: I give myself permission to be grumpy about being wrong. Now, let's hold onto that thought and go back to Jesus' parable today. That first son, the son that even the chief priests and scribes said did the will of his father... what did he do? "He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went." Ever watch a young person do that? Start out to do the wrong thing, but then change their mind and do the right thing? I hope so. I have. Ever seen a young person do that without a bit of a grumble? I haven't. And I (and I'm only speaking for myself here) I think the grumble is okay! If I say: "I think this thing is right." And you make a convincing argument that this thing is wrong, what this parable tells us is that I must, it is an ethical imperative, a moral imperative, for me to see, learn, change my mind and do the right thing. It is not, I don't think, a moral imperative to enjoy it. When I offered myself the freedom not to enjoy it, to say, **only to myself**: "Well, gosh, you are right and I am wrong. I REALLY dislike that! I don't enjoy that at all! BUT, that doesn't make it any less true, so I'm going to act on what I have come to believe." It was THEN that I learned how to be wrong. How to accept that I was wrong, and turn and change my mind. In the words of the prophet, to "Turn, then, and live."

Take a moment with this. Think of a question that has been raised in your life, any question that has real stakes: Do I take this job? Is it time to retire? Do I vote for or against this measure? Hold that question in your mind, along with the answer that you believe is correct. I do not take this job. It is time to retire. I vote for this measure. I do not purchase this item. Next, imagine someone tells you that you are wrong. Next, ask yourself: If I change my mind on this, will that change serve loving God more, or less? Will that change serve loving my neighbor more, or less? Jesus gives us this beautiful, spare, stark summation of the scriptures as he knew them, and it can serve as a kind of evaluation, "Does the thing that I think or feel or want to do serve my loving God? Does it serve my loving my neighbor?" And if the answer is no? CHANGE YOUR MIND. Change your path, change your heart, change your spirit.

And then, if the answer says change, remember, it's okay to grumble a bit. "But I thought this was the job I was working towards!" "But if I retire, how will I know who I am?" "But I really want this item!" These feelings are natural, and they are the natural consequence of changing direction. It's not necessarily fun, but it is fundamentally necessary. And here we turn briefly to Paul: "Do nothing from selfish ambition" (*why did you want that job?*) or [from] conceit, (*who do you need to be*

in retirement but a beloved child of God?). Let each of you look not to your own interests , but to the interests of others (*is this measure I want to vote for in the best interests of others?*). “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”

And if the answer is change, remember, change is hard and that’s okay. Let yourself have your feelings. But then: Change. Change your mind. Change your heart. Change your spirit. “Turn, then, and live.”

Texts for September 27, 2020

[Ezekiel 18: 1 - 4, 25 - 32;](#)

[Psalm 62:1-9;](#)

[Luke 11:42-46](#)



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