

September 25, 2011

THE BETTER OF TWO BAD SONS

An old southern preacher once found a dead mule on the front lawn of his church. He called the local Department of Sanitation and asked that the animal be removed.

But the administrator from the Sanitation Department was having a bad day. He kept arguing with the pastor that his department didn't have time, money or manpower to come to the church to remove this dead mule, but the pastor would not be put off.

Finally, in a huff, the administrator said, "Didn't you say you were a pastor? I thought it was the clergy's job to take care of the dead."

To which the preacher replied, "It is – but first, we are required to notify the next of kin."

Just like the preacher, Jesus doesn't mince words in this debate with the religious authorities. When they come to question him about his authority, his response is a question and then a story that leave the religious authorities like the administrator: still full of attitude, but on the losing end of an argument.

We don't often think of Jesus having to prove his authority, but it was a frequent task because of Jesus' lack of credentials. Just like today, rabbis were ordained after years of education and training. Jesus was never trained or ordained as a rabbi. As the son of a carpenter, he would have received an education in Hebrew and the Law; beyond that, he received no formal religious education, as far as the authorities were concerned.

And when they taught, rabbis would begin their sentences one of two ways. They would say, "Scripture says" and then cite an Old Testament passage; or they would refer to a well-known rabbi, and begin their sentence with "Rabbi So-and-So says." That was their authority.

Jesus on the other hand spoke as his own authority. In Matthew Chapter 5, in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not murder,’ but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.” And, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that anyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery in his heart.”

Murder and adultery: Jesus is citing two of the 10 Commandments here. And yet instead of stating what the law said or what rabbis have taught about the law, Jesus gives his own opinion of the law. For him, we may not have committed a physical murder or a legal act of adultery. But Jesus says even the words and thoughts are to be within God’s will in our relationships with one another.

So as far as the authorities are concerned, Jesus is creating new laws. And now as he teaches in Jerusalem, the chief priests and elders confront him, wanting to know by what authority he is performing miracles and teaching the people.

Now bear in mind, the authorities didn’t really care what Jesus’ answer is. Dave does that to me now and then. He’ll ask me what I think, and whatever I have to say, he does the exact opposite. As far as the authorities were concerned, Jesus could say he was teaching by God’s or even by his own authority – for which they could arrest him for blasphemy; or Jesus would have to admit he had no authority, which would defame him in the eyes of the people.

But one thing I’ve noticed about Jesus. He never bothers answering a trick question the way the authorities expect. Rather, he comes up with a unique answer.

In this case, he graciously offers to answer the authorities’ question if they will answer one of his: What authority did John the Baptist have to preach – by God or by human? And the authorities immediately realize they can’t answer the question. If they say John was baptized by

God, then Jesus could condemn them for not following him. But if they claim humans ordained John's ministry, they would be torn apart by the crowd that recognized John as a prophet. So the authorities say they don't know. And in turn, Jesus refuses to answer their question.

But not content to let their "we don't know" stand alone, Jesus continues with the story of two sons. A father asks both of them to go and work for him in his vineyard. The first one refuses to his father's face to do a requested task. Later, however, he reconsiders and does as he was told.

Anyone who has ever been a teenager can identify with the first son. All of us reach that age where we need to exert a little independence – to show we're not a pushover. It is a sign of becoming adults. A little spunk is a good thing now and again – although our opinion of that spunk may depend on whether we are the givers or the receivers of it.

Remember in 1970 when *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* debuted? It was a time when single working women were something of an anomaly in the workforce. But there sat mousy Mary Richards in the office of curmudgeon Lou Grant, hoping to be hired by the Minneapolis TV station. Somehow, Mary didn't fit the profile of a hard-nosed journalist.

But when Mr. Grant begins to ask Mary questions about her marital status and religion, she straightens up in her chair and points out that by law, he isn't allowed to ask those questions. He looks her in the eye and says, "You know what? You've got spunk."

And as Mary smiles and begins to agree with him, he barks out, "I hate spunk!"

The first son in Jesus' parable has spunk – but he also has common sense. Although initially disobedient, he doesn't remain defiant. Maybe he recalls all his father has done for him, or maybe he realizes father does know best. For whatever reason, he changes his mind and goes to work in the vineyard per his father's wishes.

But then there is the second son. When the father asks him to help in the vineyard, the son is quick to answer, “I go, sir.” In our vernacular of today, we’d say, “Absolutely. On my way. Consider it done.” But what happens? Nothing. The son doesn’t go to the vineyard; he never goes to the vineyard.

The first son might have been a little spunky, but the second son is well on his way to becoming a con artist. His attitude is, “Tell ‘em what they want to hear, but don’t put yourself out.” His outward appearance to his father is one of respect; but inside, there is no love and no desire to be of any help to his father.

When Jesus then asks which of the two sons did his father’s will, even the Pharisees can recognize that of the first was the better of the two sons. And that’s when Jesus lowers the boom. Those who the religious authorities would call the worst of sinners – the tax collectors and the prostitutes – Jesus says those who may initially turn their backs on God and yet later choose to follow him are the first sons. They are the ones who will inherit the kingdom of God.

The religious authorities questioning Jesus are like the second son – ones who pose as faithful followers of God, who call him “Sir” and say they will do his will. And yet as their questioning of Jesus shows, they are only paying lip service to God. They have not committed their hearts or service to God.

If you’ve ever heard people say they don’t go to church because we’re full of hypocrites, here is the story they could cite as evidence. It is good for us to gather on Sundays to sing God’s praises, to worship Him and hear the stories of the Old and New Testament. But what the world wants to see is what difference does our being here on Sunday makes in the way we live Monday through Saturday. When they see nothing in our behavior that is reflective of God’s manner and will, then they like Jesus see a son who says, “I go, sir,” but then does nothing at all.

Jesus reminds us that our deeds are important. Our faith saves us, but our faith should be demonstrated by the practices of our lives. The good news is, we always have that chance to be like the first son: to put our faith into practice, even if we have repeatedly said no to God throughout our lives. When we make up our minds to serve God, that is what honors God.

One more thing about this scripture: As we read this story of the two sons, we might realize neither was fully praiseworthy. The best son would have immediately answered his father, “I go, Sir,” in respect and obedience, and then headed straight for the vineyard.

And by that example crossing our minds, we have the indirect answer to the question the authorities are putting to Jesus: By whose authority is Jesus teaching? By his father’s. God told Jesus to go to work in the vineyard – in the world. And Jesus responded with, “I go, sir,” and obediently came to earth. And he is teaching and preaching and doing God’s will wherever he goes, and will obediently follow His Father’s will, even though it leads to a cross.

This week, may we choose to be the best of sons and daughters to God, listening with our hearts to the Holy Spirit’s direction, and then doing the will of our Lord and Savior.