

September 27, 2020

Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Matthew's Gospel presents us today with the story of two sons, one who said that he would not do his father's will to go work in the vineyard and the second son who said he would but did not do it. The gospel says that the first son *changed his mind* and went. The gospel text does not tell us *why* he changed his mind, only that he *did* change his mind. The importance of changing our mind means even more when we read in the second reading from Philippians today that we are to have in us "the same attitude that is in Christ Jesus." Some translations say that we are to have the mind of Christ. If we are going to be serious about our discipleship, we need to be serious about being open to changing our attitude, changing our mind to be more like that of Jesus Christ.

Most people resist changing their minds. Most of us look for information that supports what we already believe and ignore the rest. People can set aside evidence, even hard scientific data that does not agree with our strongly held beliefs. Facts usually are not enough to change our minds or attitudes, which can lead to a change in behavior. What does work in changing a person's mind? Sometimes fear is a good motivator. For instance, if you read magazines printed in the 1940's and 50's you will see advertisements that said something like this, that smoking is good for your health, doctors recommend it for relaxation. What led so many people to quit smoking in the 1960's? The 1964 Surgeon General's report that said that smoking is hazardous to human health, increasing the chance of lung cancer and bronchitis, which can lead to death. In 1965, congress required by law that health warnings be printed on packages of cigarettes and ended all broadcast advertisements of cigarettes. That worked! Fear was the motivator that led many people to quit an addictive habit. Some people will stop sinning out of the fear of going to hell. While fear often works to change our attitude or our mind, *stop* a behavior that is not so true to begin a new behavior. Parents know this when they first ask their children to make their bed or clean their room only to find hours afterward that nothing was done. Fear of punishment rarely works. Even for most adults, reward is a better motivator. A hospital learned that communications about getting medical personnel to wash their hands before and after seeing a patient will prevent the spread of disease resulted in only one in ten actually doing so. It was a fear-based message. However, when they installed a camera with a reader board that gave the message when the nurse or doctor

washed their hands, “Good job! Thank for helping to keep our hospital healthy” that simple, positive reward was enough to change their behavior and the number of people who washed their hands jumped from one in ten to nine in ten.

It takes more than fear to have the mind or attitude of Christ. What is the motivation, the reward that will help us to get over our self-centered attitude, our mind that focuses on our ego? What will help us to have the attitude of Christ who “though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be grasped” and who “humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”? Let’s face it, giving up good appearances, making sacrifices for others, putting others before ourselves is not a real reward in and of itself.

What then, is our reward of having the attitude of the first son in the Gospel, who changes his mind, to have attitude of Christ in us, to accept that God’s ways are not our ways? The most obvious reward is the one Jesus promises at the end of our lives: heaven. Heaven is our ultimate goal. What reward is there now, in this life that might help to motivate us to change, to a real conversion of mind and heart? The immediate reward is summed up in two words. Those two words are peace and joy. When we are willing to change our attitude, to be obedient to the Father, even when we feel that we like Jesus on the cross, we will rise with him to new life. We will rise to the joy of the big battles of this life is not ultimately our responsibility. We simply do not have that much power and influence. We can do small acts with great love, as Saint Theresa of Calcutta says. Our acts, no matter how great they may look to the eyes of the world, are small. They only become great because we give them to God. God’s love is what is truly great because God who is love is eternal. That it is the attitude of Christ, the state of mind that changes our heart to see that the tax collectors and prostitutes who change their minds and believe, will be first in the Kingdom of heaven.

Mother Theresa was a short, wrinkled old woman who by the world’s standards was not at all attractive. Yet, she won the hearts of people all over the world because of her joy, a joy that came from having the mind and attitude of Christ in her. Jesus is our source of joy as well.