Ezekiel 18:25-28/Philippians 2:1-11/
Matthew 21:28-32

EACH NEW HOUR HOLDS NEW CHANCES

As with so many of Jesus’ stories, it helps us to understand the parables when we retell them dressed up in our own circumstances and times. So let’s do that to today’s gospel. Once upon a time... there was a wealthy landowner in Orinda who had two sons, and many vineyards in Sonoma Valley. One son was named Zinfandel and the other was named Merlot.

The man said to his first son: “Son, the vats have been emptied and several hundred cases of wine are bottled and ready to be shipped to Costco’s and Cost Plus. Go and work in the warehouse today and make sure that all the deliveries get out on time. I’m counting on you.” “Sure, Dad, no problem. Consider it done. I’m on my way.”

Zinfandel jumped into his Jaguar, rolled the top down and turned Sirius Radio on full volume, but as he was cruisin’ ‘cross the Richmond Bridge, the sun felt so warm and the sky was so clear and blue, he decided to skip the work that had to be done in Sonoma and head toward Stinson Beach. “No way I’m workin’ in that smelly warehouse on a day like today!” he thought to himself.

Meanwhile the father went to the second son, Merlot, and said the same thing: “Go work in the vineyard.” “Dad, I’ve got a golf tournament today; no way I can go to Sonoma. My foursome will lose without me.” But, as Merlot pulled out of the driveway in his truck, and merged onto Highway 24, he called his buddy on the cell phone and said: “Listen, man; you’re gonna have to find a fourth for the game when you get to the golf course. I gotta get some shipments out for my father at the warehouse. Try me next time.”

Now which of the two, do you suppose, did the will of his father?

Changing your mind is one thing. Putting the car in a different direction than you started out doesn’t take too much effort, just a turn of the wheel. Deciding to hold my tongue and be patient with a parishioner or a co-worker doesn’t require a great deal of restraint. Helping your brother or sister when you’d rather be watching television isn’t heroic. How many times do we say ‘Yes’ just to get someone off our back? A little more money toward a charitable cause or in the Sunday offertory basket is hardly an indication of conversion.

Jesus’ invitation in the gospel is not a call to change -- but rather, to be transformed... renewed. There’s a big difference! Change refers to adaptation, reaction, without necessarily involving any newness of being.
Transformation in the spirit of the gospels, the radical renewal engineered and made possible by God’s grace, implies a “new attitude.” It brings a fresh energy flowing from the center to all the parts of our being: our words and deeds, our minds and bodies, our creative powers and our daily choices -- no matter what hold the external circumstances of our lives has on us. This kind of transformation or conversion can happen to each of us and all of us, no matter our age or status in life. It can happen... to a youngster who decides to cheerfully share her toys, to a teen who initiates a serious conversation with his parents with whom he’s been having tensions, to a man who does some soul-searching about the direction of his life, to a frazzled wife and mom who stops to savor some time alone with the Lord and to be grateful, to a priest who accepts his human limitations and allows the Lord to work through him.

St. Paul says: Have in you the same attitude that is in Christ. He did not cling to his status of being God, but emptied himself, becoming the servant of all. God’s promise of transformation is not a demand: “Clean up your act... pull yourself together... You’d better produce or else...” No, God’s promise is the ecstatic invitation of lover to the beloved: “Come, join yourself to me, and from our togetherness there will come forth a new creation!”

Jesus’ simple story of the two sons takes the Gospel out of the realm of the "theoretical" and places the mercy of God into the midst of our busy, complicated everyday lives. Compassion, forgiveness and mercy are only words until our actions give full expression to those values in our relationships with others; our identifying ourselves as Christians and calling ourselves disciples of Jesus mean nothing until our lives express that identity in the values we will uphold, the beliefs we live and the causes we champion. Discipleship requires us to embrace the Gospel not as an unattainable ideal but as an attitude and perspective for approaching our world, a compass that guides us on our journey to life's fulfillment in God.

We can’t overlook the third son in the story who was sent to work in the vineyards -- Jesus, the faithful Son of the Father. He saw the slow but fruitful growth of the grapes in the field, seeds that had changed into plants... and Jesus called himself the vine, his followers the branches. He appreciated the quality of a good wine and saved a wedding feast by turning water into a fine vintage... when Jesus changed a potential social embarrassment into an act of delightful hospitality. He knew that the wine could not be produced if the grapes weren’t pressed and crushed... and Jesus offered his own life to be pressed for the service of others.
The blessing cup of wine that passed from hand to hand at his last supper with his friends became the life-blood that courses through you and me. He changes the worshiping crowd into the People of God. He changes the faltering sinner into a haloed saint. He changes the timid teenager into a determined disciple. He changes the suspicious mind into the believing heart. He transforms you and me into the Body of Christ... into the community of the Church.

The African-American poet Maya Angelou, who died a few years ago, wrote a poem entitled: On The Pulse Of Morning. She delivered it at the Presidential Inauguration of 1993, and in 1994 her audio recording of it received a Grammy Award. Like most of her poetry, it’s spellbinding, especially when she delivered it herself. Angelou’s poem proposes the possibility of being transformed, receiving a second chance. Some of her words in that poem echo today’s gospel and the call of Jesus inviting us to be renewed:

Women, children, men...
Lift up your hearts
Each new hour holds new chances
For a new beginning.
Do not be wedded forever to fear...
The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space
To place new steps of change
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage...

John Kasper, OSFS

Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.
Lift up your eyes
Upon this day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.