

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” Matthew 21:28-32 NRSV

Jesus tells this simple story in response to a question by the chief priests and elders of the people of his authority to teach. We could wrongly view this as a black and white issue; a contrast between those who respond to Christ and those who don't. Calvin explained the theme of the parable as follows: “We learn that faith does not consist merely in a person giving subscription to true doctrine, but also includes something greater and deeper: the hearer is to deny himself and commit his whole life to God.” Frederick Dale Bruner writes that “Jesus saw Israel as two, not one: believing and unbelieving Israel. Israel was not a monolithic *massa perditionis*, wholly evil. Israel had its remnant; Israel had some faith ~ and faith where it was least expected ~ among the despised classes.” Bruner writes: “Our parable is directed against both a doctrinal fundamentalism that tells people that believing the right truths is the way of salvation, without any moral component...and against an emotional revivalism that looks only for responses, not for life.” (The Churchbook A Commentary of Matthew 13-28)

I read this parable as a personal challenge to more consistent obedience. I can see myself in both of the sons. At any given moment of any given day I find myself responding to Christ's invitation to work in his vineyard with either a hesitant, vacillating obedience or a pious and well-excused refusal. I, like Bruner's description of Israel, have a divided heart that consists of both believing and unbelieving elements. I am a redeemed sinner who continues to live between the “already” and the “not yet”!

The truly obedient Son is described in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2:1-13. (Well worth rereading as a reminder of what Martin Luther defined as “true faith: a living, busy, active, mighty thing.”) But how are we, sinners living with divided hearts, to gain the “same mind that was in Christ Jesus”?

While cleaning off my desk recently I came across a wonderful article entitled “Practicing Easter” in the December 2005 edition of *Reformed Worship* by David Vroege. Vroege tells the story of Barbara Brown Taylor's childhood experience with ballet. Barbara wanted to dance, but was first taught to learn and practice the basic positions of ballet. “As in ballet, she says, so it is with our faith; we have to learn the basic positions. Have to learn their names. Each requires our full attention and our best efforts ~ each requires us to practice.” Vroege then lists some Easter practices from Acts 2:42-47: “Practice Being Together, Practice Learning the Apostles Teaching, Practice Eating Together, Practice Praying, Practice Giving, Practice the Faith.”

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Barbara's story and Vroege's application of it were a wonderful challenge to live my faith as a busy, active, mighty obedience to God's invitation. I want so much to "dance" as an obedient son of God. But before I can "dance" I must learn to "practice Easter".

May you be encouraged this week in your own obedience as daughters and sons of the Living God.

Under God's Mercy,

Howie