

Date: September 25, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 26

SERMON: The Importance of Changing Our Minds

Text(s): Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

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In my freshman year at the small Christian liberal-arts college in Kentucky, which I attended long enough to meet my future bride, there was a guy fresh from the one of the remoter valleys in the mountains of West Virginia. To say that he was unsophisticated would be a large understatement. I expect many of us could imagine a person from a similarly remote and fairly isolated part of rural Maine.

Richard had come from a very sheltered and pietistic religious background, and he had formed the habit of arising early every morning at 5:00 a.m. to pray. Now, Christian college or not, college students do not get up at 5:00 in the morning to do anything, much less pray. They're lucky if they've gotten to bed by 5. But Richard was different. He also loved to sing, and had a very resonant, deep bass voice.

Unfortunately the dorm he lived in was not well sound-proofed, and Richard had apparently never heard about silent prayer. In the basement there was a prayer chapel, and that's where Richard spent his morning hours, loudly beseeching God for guidance in his life.

Right above the chapel was the room of a guy named Howie who, while he certainly believed in prayer, did not believe in it at 5:00 a.m. directly under his room.

After several mornings of Howie being awakened by Richard praying, "Lord I want to do your will. Show me what you want me to do with my life," Howie decided that he was going to help God answer Richard's prayer. So he borrowed a megaphone from one of the cheerleaders of the basketball team, and the next morning when Richard's resonant bass pleas resounded from the basement prayer chapel, Howie placed the megaphone on the floor of his room and shouted, "Richard, I want you to be a

missionary. Go to India."

There was dead silence from below. No more prayers that morning or the next. But two days later, Richard, who had apparently been wrestling mightily in spirit with this unexpected answer to his prayer, was back in the basement. "Lord, I don't know anything about India, but if you really are calling me to go to India, please give me a sign, and I'll go." Back on the floor went the megaphone, followed by this shouted message from Howie, "Richard, I've changed my mind. Go to Africa."

That ended the early morning prayer sessions in the basement. I don't know if Richard ever got wise to what was happening. Perhaps the notion of God changing his mind was too confusing for him— it would be for most of us, I suspect— or, perhaps he just decided that college was not for him, but whatever the reason, about a year later, he enlisted in the Marines and went to Viet Nam instead.

Both of our lessons this morning deal with this business of changing our minds, and both suggest not only that a radical change of mind is necessary to enter the kingdom of God, but that it may be as unsettling to us, as the notion of God's apparent change of mind was for Richard.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus is confronted by some skeptical religious people who demand that he tell them by whose authority he dares to teach and heal and to gather disciples around him. They are concerned about the sort of people he seems to be attracting to his movement. How could a genuine prophet or teacher allow himself to be associated with obviously bad people?

Rather than answer their demands, Jesus tells a parable about a man who owned a vineyard where it was time for the harvest. Having lived in France, I know that when the grapes have just the right sugar content, it's time for the harvest, and no time can be lost. That fact drives everything else for the owners of the vineyards. They can't decide to take a vacation or go tend to other business ventures. If the wine is going to

be good, the grapes must be picked when they are ready.

So this small vineyard owner has two sons, and he says to them, “Fellows, the grapes are ready, and we don’t have enough pickers. Please go to the vineyard and help pick; we’ve got to get the grapes harvested.” One of his sons says, “Okay, Pop. Sure, I’ll help out.” But as soon as he’s out of his father’s sight and hearing, he heads for town where his friends are waiting for him to have a drink or hang out. Picking grapes is definitely not his thing. The other son, is more up front about his feelings about this plea from his father, “Hey, Dad, I can’t go pick grapes. I’ve got places to go and things to do and people to see. So it takes a little longer for the hired hands to get the grapes in. No big deal.” And off he goes. But while he’s dialing up his next appointment on his cell phone, he begins feeling guilty. After all, those grapes have provided him and his brother with the good life they have. And he really does love his father, even if his father is asking him to do hard physical labor in the hot sun, and he doesn’t want to do it. But he decides that he really needs to do it. So he changes his mind and goes out and takes his place with the hired hands and helps to get the grapes in.

Jesus then asks his group of critics, “Which son did the will of his father?” We can almost feel them squirm, can’t we? The point of the parable is obvious. So they grudgingly answer, “*The one who changed his mind and went into the vineyard.*”

And then Jesus drives home the lesson with the force of a sledge hammer. “*Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John the Baptist came to you, in the form of a righteous and holy man, and you would not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, even after you saw people as bad as tax collectors and prostitutes being transformed, you did not*

change your minds and believe him.”

The parable indicts them, not for failing to believe the message of a prophet when they first heard it, but for not changing their minds when the evidence of that prophet’s truthfulness was right in front of their eyes. What was it about their minds that needed to be changed?

In their case, it appears, to change their minds would have meant being willing to change the way they categorized people and judged them. In their minds, things were very clear. There were bad people and good people. Tax collectors and prostitutes were bad people— tax collectors because they were collaborators and thieves. And prostitutes, well, we don’t have to ask why they were in the “bad” category, do we? Of course, the fact that many of them were widows who were forced into prostitution to survive because these same self-righteous men didn’t recognize women as having any identity or rights apart from her husband was beside the point. These self-appointed judges were so caught up in their habitual way of categorizing and judging people on the basis of whether were naughty or nice, that they couldn’t even see the evidence of God’s transforming and healing work when it was in front of their faces. I know a lot of religious people like that, don’t you? They’re the ones that give religion a bad name.

The headlines this week reporting the new Vatican policy to exclude all gay men, even those who are celibate, from the priesthood is only the latest example of a religious establishment deciding who’s in and who’s out, who’s naughty and who’s nice. And we’re all aware of the actions of the Christian groups to get a referendum on the ballot for the upcoming elections in November to attempt for the third time to overturn the Maine Humanities law that ensures basic civil rights in matters such as jobs and housing to gay and lesbian persons. At our Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ the past two days in Sunday River, we heard many concerns expressed over the way Michael

Heath and his Christian Civic league are doing everything they can to create the impression that they speak for the Christian community, and that their message of intolerance is *the* Christian point of view. He has managed, for example, to be invited to represent the Christian position in a meeting on the USM campus in Portland, while other Christians who support the Maine Humanities Act have been denied the privilege to present their case as Christians. In a nearly unanimous vote yesterday, the churches of our conference called for strong opposition to the ballot referendum that would seek to overturn this law. The context in which that discussion and vote was framed was the theme of this year's conference, the prophet Micah's call to meet God's requirement: "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God."

Jesus was not just challenging his critics to change their minds in the sense of changing their personal opinions or preferences. I was going to buy a Toyota, but I changed my mind, and I'm going to buy a Volkswagen instead. That's not the kind of change of mind that Jesus was talking about. Rather he was talking about a habitual way of thinking, a mind-set, a formed and settled way of looking at the world and of understanding oneself in relation to other people.

St. Paul, in our epistle lessons, describes the effect such a change of mind or mindset, to put it more accurately, would have on relationships: "*If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy. . . be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.*"

That's a rather different mindset than that of the religious people who confronted Jesus, isn't it? David Gaiewski, our Conference Minister, gave me a new insight into this passage last night in his address to the Conference. He

said that Paul is not saying, "Be of the same opinion, but be of the same mind." Opinions are things that we form and hold or discard on the basis of our present knowledge or lack of it, or on the basis of our prejudices, and Christians may very well differ in opinions. But we are to have the same mind, or mindset. And that mind, Paul says, is "the mind of Christ. He says, "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. . . who emptied himself, and took on the form of a servant.*" We can differ in opinions and still love one another, still live together in peace, still work together for justice if we have the same mind—to look at ourselves and the world around us through the eyes of Christ, with the compassion of Christ, with Christ's concern for justice, with Christ's call to be peacemakers and reconcilers. We may not always agree how we can best achieve those goals—that's where opinions may differ—but we must agree that loving our neighbors, caring for the interests of others rather than for our own self-interest is the mind of Christ.

To change our minds, to change our judgments that we so often use to exclude other people is not easy. It's very hard. Our habitual ways of thinking and relating to others are, to a great extent, formed by the patterns that operated in our families or in our early experiences in school or church or are part of our culture. They are learned habits of thought, and to change our mindset means unlearning things that are deeply imprinted, and often below the level of conscious thought. Such change is difficult. It demands a complete re-orientation of our lives around a new center and a setting out in a new direction. That's why it's often termed "repentance" or "conversion." Unless we are willing to repent—have our minds and our direction changed, we risk being left behind congratulating ourselves on our goodness while the tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom of God ahead of us.

That fundamental change of mind is only

possible when day by day, and moment by moment, and always in relationship to one another, we deliberately and consciously open ourselves in humility and vulnerability to one another, and thus, to the work of the Spirit of Christ who is present wherever two or three are gathered in his name.

That is what Paul means when he says in the conclusion of our passage, *“Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”*

There, in one sentence, we have both halves of the paradox of the Christian life. On the one hand, salvation is God’s work alone, and not the result of any merit or works on our part. Yet, unless we cooperate with the grace of God by doing the hard work of changing our minds, we cannot experience that saving grace. It’s precisely because “it is God who is at work in you” that Paul can say, “therefore, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

Changing our minds is an act of will or a decision that we make. It’s not easy, but neither is it beyond our capability. We can do it. And the reason we can is that God is at work within us giving us the ability and the power to do what we must. It’s that simple. Difficult, but simple. With God’s help, we can change our minds.

But what’s the bottom line? Why bother to do the hard work of changing our minds? What’s in it for us? Well, the payoff is that when we stop worrying about who’s naughty and who’s nice, when we begin to serve others’ interests ahead of our own, we also discover that our true self-interest is served as well. For what all of us really need is what Paul states in his first sentence: *“If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy. . .”* Aren’t those the very things that all of us yearn for and so rarely experience in this world?

Aren’t all of us dying for encouragement, for the consolation of knowing that we are loved, for the intimacy of sharing deeply in someone else’s life, for compassion and sympathy and peace? That’s the bottom line. Those very qualities of life are what we get when we are willing to change our minds and allow the mind of Christ to be in us and control us. We get, in short, our very deepest heart’s desires.