

Matthew 21:23-32  
September 27, 2020

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Many years ago, I discovered the joy of running. While some days it would take every ounce of my energy to dawn my running shoes, head out the door and hit the pavement I knew doing so would do my body, mind and even soul well. Yet, it also took a toll on my body, which came in the way of shin splints. Initially, I tried my best to run through the pain; but that did not work well and probably was not the smartest of choices. Finally, the pain was just too much and fearful my failure to listen to my body might have led to a stress fracture I went to the doctor. Thankfully, the x-rays came back negative for a more serious injury; but the prescription my doctor gave me was to rest. No running for several weeks. Not exactly what I wanted to hear, but it was what was necessary for the renewal my body needed.

While Jesus' teaching and parable today may not be about rest; I do believe they are about renewal. In fact, I believe the living word of God we study, read, and hear are ultimately about renewal. Life. Healing. Restoration. Reconciliation. Some times those living words seem chalk full of grace; while other times, that renewal is offered through words that cut to the heart, call us from complacency, and help set our sights on the true source of healing and authority in our lives.

Last week, we basked in the graciousness of the landowner who continues to search out, welcome in, and extol the very same gift of extravagant grace on every one of those vineyard workers. But then we get to today's readings and it seems just a bit harder and perhaps harsher teaching to swallow.

His words to the religious leaders seem a bit scathing and it is all too easy for the church today to pretend those words are not applicable to us. They are in the past; yet, to view them in that perspective is to view the Bible as simply words on a page written thousands of years ago. We no longer view them as living.

Jesus' parables were meant to open his initial hearers' eyes and they are meant to open ours as well. Jesus invites us into the most beautiful of relationships. He offers to us the water of life, the living bread of heaven. He invites us to rest and renew each day in the abundant grace we unpacked last Sunday. He calls us to something more than just lip service. Something more than simply reciting a creed. He calls us into a divine partnership. So many people are looking for meaning and honestly, I cannot think of a more meaningful experience than being united with God, joined to Christ, and sent by the Holy Spirit to be partners in God's mission to bring healing to a world in need. Or as we Lutherans are akin to say, to do God's work with our hands.

The church is so often both sons in the passage. We say, "Yes, we will go... feed the hungry, visit the sick and imprisoned, act for justice, stand with the oppressed, reject the ways of sin that separate us from God and one another...", but then fail to do so. Or we say we welcome all people but will we really? Will we welcome the tax collector and prostitute? Will we see this as Christ's church or claim it solely as "our" church and those who enter better adhere to the way we do things around here? Will we cling to a mindset of maintenance and scarcity or rather set our sights on mission and abundance? Will we seek to merely survive or trust in God's power for us to thrive, even amidst a pandemic?

Or there are those times we do say no thinking we just do not have the right words to say, the gifts to share, or the time to spare; but, then that tugging of the Holy Spirit brings about a change of heart and mind and we follow where Jesus leads. That gift of grace frees us to be the people of God we are destined to be.

In both instances in the parable of the two sons, Jesus is offering an invitation to change. To renewal that comes in a relationship of loving God and loving one another. Renewal that comes through being the church, together, hand-in-hand but facing outward to the world God loves. Being sent after being bathed in the waters of grace.

Yes, our aching bodies, minds and souls do need rest and renewal and we have it. It is called Jesus. It is called grace. It is freely offered. Indeed, we are gathered by grace and every Sunday praise God for this most precious gift we are heirs to through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is a time for Sabbath rest. There is a time to simply bask in the light of the resurrection dawn that breaks in upon us.

Yet, discipleship does not only abide in the garden of the empty tomb. It also journeys to the dark and desolate place of the cross of Christ. It responds to grace by offering grace; otherwise, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer would state, it is simply “cheap grace” we reside it in. Grace moves us. Grace transforms us. Grace renews us. Grace changes our “no” to “yes.” Yes, Jesus “send me.”

And in being sent, in loving and serving our neighbor, in partnering with the Triune God in spreading seeds of grace to the world Jesus knows we will find renewal here as well. We will fully live into our calling as his disciples. We will lose ourselves from turning inward and find ourselves as we turn outward, which is truly what Luther’s understanding of this most precious gift of grace we have in Christ Jesus is all about – it frees us from our sin and frees us to love and serve one another.