



## “What it Means to Give: Preparing the Heart”

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*Matthew 21:23-32*

Today we recognize two important moments in the life of our church – one specifically for Royal Lane and the other one connected to Christians across the globe. For Royal Lane, today is the last Sunday for us to emphasize stewardship in our worship service. I know many of you are probably breathing a sigh of relief. But we still have work to do. We have only collected half of our pledges for 2018 and we still have many ministries that need willing volunteers. If you have not turned in a pledge card or are not caught up with your current pledge, or if you have not found a place to get plugged in to the mission of this church, Royal Lane needs you to help us spread the all-encompassing, inclusive love of Christ. Today is also World Communion Sunday. We celebrate that we share a common communion with fellow Christians and that we are connected to kindred all over the world. I can't think of a more fitting day to celebrate World Communion Sunday than on this last day of our stewardship season when we make that final push to commit ourselves to the work of Christ through this church.

I have enjoyed this stewardship month because I chose to stick with the texts provided by the lectionary. I was amazed at how directly the scripture lessons gave us guidance for what it means to give. In fact, it is my belief, that there is a connective thread of stewardship running through the Bible. We hear stories of God providing for Abraham while, in turn, Abraham welcomed angels. We have followed a starving Israelite people in the wilderness who were given, by God, their daily bread, manna from heaven. The Hebrew people committed to give their first fruits and their tithes and offerings to God. And Jesus tells stories of a farmer filling his barns and of servants caring for their talents. Our holy book is full of people who offered their gifts to God and demonstrated for us ways to give.

But, as we exit stewardship season, I must admit that I'm a little relieved. It can be rather abrupt and off-putting to discuss volunteering or giving money every week from the pulpit. But the Scripture lessons this month have made stewardship difficult for us to ignore. The Gospel reading for this morning, especially, calls us back to what it means to give. And although, personally, I might value being more indirect in my petitions for giving your time and money, the parable today is anything but shy. Today's reading is one of Jesus' shorter parables, just a few lines. It begins with the question, “What do you think?” And if Jesus asks a question you can bet the answer is obvious. You can bet Jesus has a response in mind. He continues, “A man had two sons.” The father told one to go into the field and work. He said he wouldn't, but he ended up going. He told the second one to go into the field and work. He said he would, but he didn't go. “Which one,” Jesus asked, “did the will of the father?”

This challenging question was addressed to the chief priests and to the elders, that is, to the seriously religious people in that society, people who were called the religious establishment or the religious elite. Jesus was suggesting that they were religious with their words, but not with their deeds. They spoke with religious rhetoric, but they didn't act as spiritual leaders. Such was the case of these religious officials. They had been using all the right words, going through all the right rituals, performing all the right ceremonies. They had God on their lips, but not in their hearts. They had said "yes" to God, but they did not see and follow God. Sometimes we are blind to God's activity in our midst. Sometimes our actions do not match our words.

Jesus says if you are going to live your faith, if you are going to follow him, then you are going to have to do something. Christianity is not about talking. It is not a secret language, although a lot of people think it is. Sometimes when folks talk with me, they clean up their language and start using flowery, religious words. They think being spiritual is utilizing a certain vocabulary or claiming to be more pious. That is not what Christianity is about. Christianity is not simply about talking. It isn't about the words we sling at each other to seem better, stronger, wiser, and more powerful. Christianity doesn't hide behind chatter or gossip. Christianity is about growing, doing, living, responding, developing, maturing, giving, forgiving, and loving. Christianity isn't only about hoarding our daily bread, coveting our stash. It is about sharing communion with all of God's people.

And so, there was a man who had two sons. He said to the first son, "Will you go and work in the vineyard today? The vineyard is a mess, and there is so much work to be done. Picking up rocks. Planting. Pruning. Plucking grapes. Producing wine. Will you do the work in the vineyard today? In other words, will you tend to the needy and dying, the weak and the oppressed, the hurting and the brokenhearted? Will you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit those in prison?" And the first son said, "I can't do it. I'm sorry. I'm just too busy and the work is hard. I am not worthy enough to enter the vineyard." And so, the father approached his second son, "Will you go and work in the vineyard today?" And the second son said, "Of course, you can count on me." And the second son felt proud of his initiative and his commitment, yet he didn't do any of the work.

And so, the vineyard remained a mess and there was still so much to be done. Finally, the first son listened to his heart and went to the vineyard. He might've not been as religious, and learned, and haughty, and proud, and confident, and sure of himself, but he went. And that first son who went found that he brought heaven to earth, he brought God to the messed-up vineyard. And, if we notice the presence of the tax collectors and prostitutes in this narrative, they were the ones who entered the kingdom of God before the Pharisees. We see that the first son represented the outcasts in this parable. The father needed someone to do the work and so he approached people from the lower rungs of society to see if they would go. This first son, the one who didn't feel like he could go, the one who felt inadequate and insufficient, he was the one who had a change of heart. He was the tax collector and sinner; the poor and the prostitute; the mean and the misguided; the defeated, the demoralized, the downtrodden. He was the one who finally went and answered the father's lingering questions, "Will you be the one to tend to the needy and dying, the weak and the oppressed, the hurting and the brokenhearted? Will you be the one to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit those in prison?" Yes, I will be the one.

And then, Jesus looked the religious leaders in the eyes and asked the penetrating question: “And which of the two sons was faithful to the father’s will? Which of the two sons, the religious son or the reprobate son, entered a dying world and worked for the purposes of God?” And the answer was obvious. And the answer is obvious for us today. Jesus continued, “And so the tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God before you, you hypocrites who talk a big game, you who look so religious and talk so religious.” Those who have wrecked and ragged lives and probably don’t think they could do anything to clean up the mess in the vineyard, they are bringing heaven to earth. They, like the first son, have prepared their hearts to work for God. They had a change of heart. Like the first son, they started to walk away from the mess, but took a second look, had a change of heart, and went and did what needed to be done. God accomplishes God’s work with the laborers who act for justice and push for peace and spread kindness and lavish love on the world, no matter who they are.

This parable is an invitation from Jesus to go and do God’s work in the vineyard, in the messed-up world in which we live. And living like a Christian is hard work. There are so many hurting people to care for, so many needy and dying, so many weak and oppressed, so many beaten up and brokenhearted. There are so many hungry, so many naked, so many sick, so many in prison. And it is work to live as a Christian in this shattered world. It is work to care for aging parents. It is work to keep our marriages rewarding and robust. It is work to fight cancer and to comfort the hurting. It is work to free the oppressed. It is work to look each other in the eyes rather than hurling insults over Facebook. It is work to acknowledge racism. It is work to stand up for those being told to sit down. The vineyard is a mess and it needs workers.

The vineyard will always be a mess. There will always be earthquakes in the Mexico Cities of the world. There will always be wars in the North Koreas of the world. There will always be divorces and families falling apart. There will always be poor children living down the street, with not enough money and emotional resources to make it. There will always be people of color in prison, sentenced without fair and unbiased justice. There will always be travelers and refugees and immigrants scared to leave their homes where they have produced and where they have played. The vineyard is a mess.

And what is the reaction of the church to this pain and devastation in the world around us? Too often, we hold our worship services in the middle of the vineyard, don’t we? We have our Bible studies and our holy meetings in the middle of the prosperous property. We go out into the heart of the vineyard and have our fellowships, eat our cheese and drink our wine, and we say we are going to do the work, yet we simply look religious.

And so, as I imagine the father in the parable for today, as I imagine God in our lives today, I see God’s frustration for our unwillingness to do the needed work in the vineyard. I can hear God saying, “I will go and find somebody else who will do the work in this world of mine.” In other words, this parable is an invitation for us to not be like the Pharisees. It is an invitation for us to go into God’s messed-up world and do the hard and important work. And, as I said earlier when Jesus asked the question, “What do you think,” that indeed the answer is obvious. Jesus has a clear point to his parable. Jesus is inviting you and me to prepare our hearts. You and I need a change of heart. We need a change of heart about the messed-up world around us. We may have said “no” to the appeal for good stewardship, to the appeal to do the committee work of the

church, to the appeal to pledge, to tithe, to witness, to worship, to serve. How many times have our answers been “no” but our hearts are changing? How many times have we been too busy, but our hearts are changing? How many times have we felt inadequate, but our hearts are changing?

Even when we say no, our heavenly parent allows us to remain daughters and sons and continues to love us. You and I need a change of heart about the painful needs of hurting people around us. We need a change of heart about actually doing God’s work of love in a messed-up world. We all need this change of heart so we can labor in the vineyard and bring the wine and bread of communion to all of God’s children.

One time, Jesus told a parable about two sons. “Now, which of the two did the will of the father?” And the answer was and still is so obvious.

Amen.