

Sermon: Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21, Year A
Matthew 21:23–32
By the Rev. Alfredo Feregrino
St. Luke's ~ San Lucas Episcopal Church
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Have you ever heard the story of “The Rabbi’s Gift?”

The story is about an old monastic community in decline. Once, this community had been a thriving monastery, but now there were only five monks left, all of them over the age of retirement.

The Abbot, the leader of the community, was worried. He knew that if something did not change, eventually the monastery would close.

One day, the Abbot went to visit a wise friend, a Rabbi who frequently visited the monastery, and he shared his concerns with him.

And the Rabbi said, “Yes, I understand. Nobody visits my synagogue anymore either.”

So the Abbot and the Rabbi sat together. They read from the Scriptures. They prayed together. And they wept together.

Finally, the Abbot asked his friend:

“Do you have any advice for me? Is there anything we can do to save our community?”

And the Rabbi said:

“I am sorry. I have no advice for you. The only thing I can tell you is this:

“The Messiah is among you, among the monks in the monastery.”

So the Abbot returned to the monastery and shared the Rabbi’s words with the other monks.

“The Messiah is among us.”

And suddenly the monks began to wonder: What does that mean? Could Brother John or Thomas, or the Abbot himself, be the Messiah?

And everything began to change. As the monks began to imagine that one of their brothers could actually be the Christ, they started caring for one another in a new way. They began treating one another differently.

They listened to one another more carefully. They treated one another with extraordinary respect. Their prayers deepened. Their worship changed.

And slowly, people outside the monastery began to notice. Visitors came and experienced something different in that place. They experienced something holy.

More people came. Some decided to stay. New monks joined the community.

And eventually the monastery began to thrive again. And all because the Rabbi helped the monks see what had been true all along: that the Messiah was among them.

And the Gospel that we heard today is also inviting us to learn to see differently. The Gospel is inviting us to begin to see things in a new way.

Jesus is in the Temple, and the chief priests and elders come to him and ask, “By what authority are you doing these things?” And Jesus responds by telling them a story about a father and his two sons.

The father goes to the first son and says, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” And the son says, “No. I will not go.” But later, he changes his mind and goes. Then the father asks the second son to go into the vineyard. And the second son says, “Yes, sir. I will go.” But he never goes.

So Jesus asks, “Which of the two did the will of his father?” And they answer, “The first.”

And then Jesus says something unexpected. Something that probably shocked the religious leaders who were listening to him: “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

Wow.

Think about that for a moment. Tax collectors and prostitutes.

These were people standing outside the boundaries of religious morality in the Palestine of the first century. They were rejected by religious society.

These were people on the margins. And Jesus says: They are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you.

But why?

Because they listened to John the Baptist. They believed his message, and they changed.

The Gospel tells us that the first son changed his mind.

And this brings us to a very important Greek word in our Christian tradition: Metanoia.

We often translate metanoia simply as “repentance.”

But sometimes, when we hear the word repentance, we think it simply means feeling guilty or feeling sorry for something we have done.

Metanoia is much deeper. Metanoia means a change of mind. A change of heart. A change of direction. Metanoia means allowing God to transform the way we see ourselves, the way we see other people, and the way we live our lives.

And that is exactly what happened to the monks in the story.

Nothing outside the monastery changed. They were still five old monks. They still had the same building. They still had the same problems.

But something inside them changed. They began to see one another differently.

“The Messiah is among us,” they said. And because they began to see differently, they began to live differently. That is metanoia. And perhaps this is what Jesus is asking of us today.

So, I wonder:

Can we change the way we see ourselves? Can we change the way we see one another? Can we change the way we see those whom society has rejected?

Because sometimes, even in the Church, we may be tempted to decide who belongs and who does not. Who is one of “us” and who is one of “them.”

But Jesus keeps breaking those boundaries.

Jesus eats with sinners. Jesus touches people considered unclean. Jesus speaks with people others avoid. Jesus welcomes the person who has been faithful their entire life. And Jesus welcomes the person who has made terrible mistakes.

Christ welcomes all.

But there is something important we should understand about that welcome. Jesus welcomes us as we are, but Jesus does not leave us where we are. The welcome of Christ is an invitation to metanoia. To a change of heart, to transformation, to a new way of seeing.

Maybe some of us need to change the way we see ourselves. Perhaps you have carried something from your past for many years and quietly wondered: Would God really welcome me?

Perhaps we need to change the way we see others.

Who are the tax collectors and prostitutes of our own time? Who are the people we quietly believe do not belong?

Who makes us uncomfortable? Who are the people whose lives, politics, language, culture, economic status, or identity are so different from ours that we have difficulty seeing Christ in them?

You know, every time we renew our Baptismal Covenant in the Episcopal tradition, we are asked this very question:

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”

And we answer, “I will, with God's help.”

Notice that this question does not say some persons. It says all persons.

And then we promise to “respect the dignity of every human being.”

Every human being. This requires metanoia. This requires a change of heart.

Because seeking Christ in all persons means learning to see differently, learning to see things in a new way.

Maybe the invitation of this Gospel is the same invitation the Rabbi gave to the monks. He helped them see differently.

Look again. “The Messiah is among you.”

So let me ask you:

I wonder, what would happen if we really believed that?

I wonder, what would happen if we started caring for our family, our friends, and our neighbors as if Christ himself were present in them?

I wonder, what would happen if we welcomed the outsider, listened to their story, and valued their experience and perspective as if Christ himself were speaking to us through them?

I wonder, how would that change us? How would that change the way we see one another?

What if we looked at one another and thought:

Maybe Christ is meeting me through this person.

Maybe Christ is trying to teach me something through this person.

Maybe I am the one who needs to change.

That is metanoia, a change of heart.

And soon, we will come to this table.

We will come from different places, with different stories, different struggles, and different hopes.

But please know this: Jesus welcomes us.

Not because we are perfect. Not because we have everything figured out. But because this is Christ's table. And Christ welcomes all.

So, come.

Come with your faith. Come with your doubts. Come with your wounds. Come with your questions.

And come ready to be changed, to be transformed.

And as you come, remember the words of the Rabbi: "The Messiah is among us."

Amen.

A Note from the Preacher

Because sermons are meant to be preached and therefore prepared with emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., they are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.