

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I don't have any children, so I have no business commenting on the behavior of the two sons in this gospel. One says, "Yes, I'll go to the vineyard," but doesn't. The other says, "No, I won't go," but does. Jesus asks which son does his father's will. Speaking as a complete outsider, I'd say neither one of these kids is any good. Give me a kid who says, "Yes, I'll do it," and then does it. Or a kid who says, "I just can't help today," and doesn't. At least you'd know. Who does the will of parents? A reliable kid.

To be fair, many children could turn this parable on their parents. A child says to parents, "Play with me today." One parent says yes, but never does. Another says no, but finally gives in. It would be nice to have reliable people.

Jesus didn't offer that option. He knew the real world all too well. He knew that sometimes we want to do something good, we say we will, but then we don't. Or sometimes we say, "No, I won't help," because we're tired, we're jealous, we're angry. But then we do help because we should.

Jesus told this story not to criticize children or parents, but the religious leaders of his day. He specifically applied it to the way they treated John the Baptist. They heard from John the right way to act, but because the message came from someone they did not like—a popular preacher, a threat to their own jobs, a rabble-rouser who could turn political—because the message came from John, they did not accept it.

This parable came amid a series of controversies between Jesus and his opponents in Jerusalem the week before he died. It shows one reason the plot against Jesus' life gathered steam. He did not tolerate hypocrisy among religious leaders, and they went after him. He tried stories to show the difference between what they said they believed and how they really acted.

In this parable, when Jesus asked how to evaluate the sons, the chief priests and elders acted like the second one. They said they'd do the will of the father, but they didn't. They ignored prophets like John and Jesus. On the other hand, prostitutes and tax collectors—sinners who did listen to and accept the words of Jesus—were like the first son. Jesus praised them. Prostitutes who repented found more favor than hypocritical priests.

We like to imagine ourselves as the third child Jesus never mentioned, the reliable child, the one who says, "Yes, I'll do your will," and then does it. But often we are not reliable, and often because someone we don't like criticizes us, has a point, but we refuse to listen. Still, whenever we say no to doing God's will, we have a chance to repent. If we have ever said no to speak about our faith, to tell the truth, or to love our neighbor; if we have ever said no to purity, to children, to a religious vocation, or contributing to charity, we still can do what we know is right.

It's OK to be the first son, the one who says no, as long as, thinking it over, admitting our mistakes, we enter the vineyard after all.