

## SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST/SEPT. 27, 2020

### Call to Worship/Psalm 84 (NRSV)

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!

My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD;

my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,

where she may lay her young, at your altars,

O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.

Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.

Happy are those whose strength is in you,

in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs;

the early rain also covers it with pools.

They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob!

Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed.

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God

than live in the tents of wickedness.

For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly.

O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

**Opening Hymn**

***Trust & Obey***

**Jackie Livesay**

**Opening Prayer**

We praise you, Lord God, that your Way is found not by travelling an exclusive highway, or in secrets preserved only for some, but in the open field of love and grace, where all who choose may come and play.

We praise you, Lord God, that your truth is heard not only in the words of scholars and authors, or in brittle, inflexible ideas, but in honest questions and difficult conversations, in the courageous attempts of simple people to live lives of integrity.

We praise you, Lord God, that your Life is discovered not just in the predictable places of beauty and wealth or within the confines of clearly demarcated norms, but in the unexpected generosity and pride of those who have nothing, in the creativity and risk of trying new things, and defending the vulnerable.

We open ourselves again to your call, determined to do what we promise, to follow your Way, to embody your Truth, to share your Life. And to do it all with thanksgiving and praise. Amen.

**Scripture Lesson/Matthew 21:23-32 (NRSV)**

<sup>23</sup>When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” <sup>24</sup>Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup>Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup>But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup>So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

<sup>28</sup>“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ <sup>29</sup>He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

### **Message/It’s All About the Follow-through**

I’m not a golfer. I’ve never played anything beyond the local mini-golf course. I have made a few attempts to hit a bucket of balls at a driving range with little success. Most of the time, the balls would fly off of the tee and crash loudly into the metal barrier separating me from the next tee box, the metal vibrating and ringing like a gong. And I am sure that the neighboring golfer in the next tee box was giving thanks to God under his breath for the gift of that metal barrier between us. Golf is a sport that requires a great deal of patience and concentration. While I think that I have learned to be much more patient as I’ve grown older, I continue to suffer from having the concentration of a common gnat.

While the concept of golf seems easy—hitting a small ball into a hole in as few strokes as possible—the requirements to be successful at it challenge even the best golfers in the world. One has to take in account one’s stance, the proper grip on the club, the way one’s weight shifts through one’s hips, and so on. It doesn’t take much time on the golf course to discover that a lot of choreography is necessary to make that little ball go where you want it to. But after the clubface meets the ball, the position of your club and your feet and your torso have nothing to do with whether it ends up on the green or in the sand trap. According to professor of mechanical engineering Anette “Peko” Hosoi at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: “Your motion in the follow-through has no

effect on the ball. After the point of contact, the ball doesn't respond to what you do."

But this doesn't mean that follow-through isn't important. Good control and proper stance through the complete swing keeps the clubface at an optimal angle and allows the body to rotate through a trajectory that increases the chances of precision and velocity. "You want to maximize the probability that your club will be moving fast and be pointed in the right direction when it hits the ball," says Hosoi. "Planning your follow-through can set up the end points of a trajectory that enables you to hit the ball with the maximum amount of force and control at the point of impact."

A golf swing happens too quickly for the player to stop for minute adjustments but fixing the beginning and the end points of the ideal trajectory can lead to an ideal shot. Set your initial point (the point at which the club is swung back) and the end point (where it should be at the end of the shot) and then let it fly, advises Hosoi. Allow simple physics to take control: Momentum and inertia will carry your swing past the point of impact, and centrifugal force will complete the trajectory between the two end points.

It's the same strategy athletes use in any sport that involves striking one object with another. Batters swing through after they hit the baseball, placekickers aim not at the football itself but through the goalposts, tennis players swing the racquet past the point of impact, and hockey players swing through their shot, giving the puck both speed and accuracy. Instead of focusing on the strike area, these athletes set up the conditions that will achieve maximum speed and control by playing through the entire arc of the trajectory.

A while back I heard an old witticism in which someone asks a rabbi, "Why do rabbis always answer a question with another question?" to which the rabbi replies, "Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with another question?" So also, in Matthew 21: Jesus side-steps the question of the Pharisees as to the source of his authority by asking *them* a related question about John the Baptist. Jesus and John were not only cousins, but they were also similar in that each had appeared from out of nowhere and offered a ministry that meant a

great deal to a lot of people. So, Jesus says, “Let’s back up one step to my predecessor, John. If you can tell me where his authority came from, then I’ll tell you where mine comes from.”

Jesus asks this knowing full well that the answer to both questions was the same. Neither John nor Jesus had any human authority. Neither had gone to seminary, nor had been licensed or ordained or obtained any professional credentials. If either John or Jesus had any authority to claim, it had to come directly from God. But no prophet or sage in Israel had ever had that distinction since Moses. But that’s just where Jesus had them. It was a well-known fact that the chief priests had despised John the Baptist. John had hurled insults at them—calling them a “brood of vipers.” But even worse, John placed them on par with everyone else who came out into the wilderness to see him. Neither their credentials and advanced theological degrees carried any clout with John nor, said John, did it matter to God. Even the most law-abiding folks had to submit to John’s baptism of repentance the same as everyone else.

They didn’t of course, but a lot of other folks did because they believed John really was sent from God. So, the chief priests were caught in a proverbial catch-22. If they said that God had authorized John, they would be revealed as opposing God in that they opposed John. Then again, if they said that John had no real authority from anyone, those whom John had baptized would be none too thrilled with them. In their attempt to not have *anyone* upset with them, they say to Jesus, “We don’t know.” Since they didn’t live up to their end of this verbal agreement, Jesus then says, “Well then I’m not going to tell you about my authority, either.”

On one level, it appears that Jesus is merely being cheeky. On a deeper level, however, Jesus is simply recognizing that there is little sense in talking to people who are so closed-minded. They were not really seeking information. Their minds were made up long before they asked their sly question. Even at that, however, Jesus doesn’t drop the conversation. He goes on with a little parable. We have one father and two sons. When the father orders the one son to go to work, he replies, “Forget it, Pop! I’ve got plans, things to do, people to

see. Go pick your own grapes!” But then, sometime after his father walks away, the young man’s conscience gets the better of him. So, he changes out of his good clothes, throws on his overalls and work sandals and heads out to the vineyard. Meanwhile the father has approached his other son and made the same request. “You got it, Dad! I’m on my way!” The father walks away from this exchange feeling good that at least one of his sons knows how to treat his old man with some respect. But then, unbeknownst to the father, this boy high tails it over to the skateboard park to spend some time with his friends and so never does go into the vineyard.

“Which son would you rather have?” Jesus asks. “Who really did what his father wanted?” The answer is obvious, and the chief priests give it, but they continued to scratch their heads in need of additional clarification. Therefore, Jesus goes on to explain the point of his story. John the Baptist really had come from God and, as such, he really did tell people what God desired them to do. The people who looked like lowlifes and losers—those who had, by all outward appearances, said “No” to God—ended up coming around to God’s message after all. They repented of their sins, received John’s baptism, and so did what God had yearned for in the end.

But there were others who had been saying “Yes” to God outwardly yet ultimately didn’t follow through. They looked like fine, upstanding sons of Abraham. They dressed correctly. Said all the right things. Made all the right promises. Followed the rules to a tee. But when push came to shove (as surely it did when John the Baptist confronted everyone with his fiery message of repentance), these same folks turned away from God. Their former “Yes” was undercut by their having said “No” at what turned out to be the pivotal point in God’s larger story of salvation.

Not all parables are allegories, of course, at least not in the sense that we can (or even should) try to line up each character with a real-life person. Sometimes, we even ruin a parable by over-interpreting it. In this case, however, the parable lends itself to an allegorical reading. But I wonder if there isn’t a deeper meaning beyond just identifying who is whom. After all, when precisely

was it that the tax collectors and prostitutes and others said “No” to God? Wasn’t it more the case that they had never had a chance to answer God one way or the other precisely because the religious authorities had already written them off, never bothering to address them? Because furthermore, although we can well understand that the Pharisees had said “Yes” to God, what exactly was it that they had agreed to do but then didn’t end up doing?

After all, from the outside looking in, it surely *looked* like the chief priests were following through on their “Yes” to God. Who followed the law better than they did? Who did more acts of piety and more stringently avoided sin than the Pharisees? How could Jesus compare them to the son who said “Yes” but then didn’t follow through? The entire existence of these folks looked like one giant effort at following through. Yet Jesus seems to indicate that when it came right down to it, they were missing something so fundamental that it was appropriate to compare them to the duplicitous son who *said* all the right things but who failed to *do* what his father wanted. How so? Because they missed the core of God: grace. All throughout the Bible, including the New Testament, Israel is often compared to a vineyard. So in this parable, I suspect that when we hear the father asking his sons to work in the vineyard, it is the equivalent of asking people to do good work among the people, whoever they were. That’s where the pharisees and chief priests failed. Think about it: why did it take an outsider like John the Baptist to issue an invitation into God’s realm to those on the margins? John did it first, but then Jesus himself continued extending this invitation in his own ministry. Jesus was always hanging out with whom the chief priests considered “the wrong crowd.” Indeed, the very fact that Jesus associated with “sinners” counted *against* Jesus’ being on God’s side.

But first John and then Jesus reached out to these lost, wayward, sorry souls and they did so because until then, *no one else had ever reached out to them*. What John essentially said and what Jesus went on to confirm is that it was precisely *those people* who constituted the work needed in the vineyard. If you ignored those folks, wrote them off as hopeless and not worth the time, then it was the equivalent of telling God you would work in God’s vineyard but then never doing it. Because vineyard work is grace work; it is compassionate and

merciful work. Vineyard work is not about focusing on yourself and other upstanding, good folks like us.

No, vineyard work was always supposed to be first and foremost about others, starting with the folks we feel the most tempted to overlook (if not outright condemn). The reason John and Jesus found so many people who were hungry for the message of salvation by grace is precisely because no one else had been proclaiming that message. The Pharisees actually *avoided* these people. God, they thought, likes only certain types of folks, and so if a given person did not appear to be in that likeable category to begin with, then the duty of the devout was to steer well clear of them. But John declared that God wanted them, too. We all find a place in God's realm the same way, through repentance and commitment to God's will for our lives and our world, a commitment given expression through the sacrament of baptism.

What's more, if we really understand that our own salvation depends on that gift of grace, we are only too happy to share this good news with anyone who will listen. We won't wait for other people to clean up their acts and become more buttoned-down like us before we share the good news. We won't wait for *anything* before getting out into that vineyard of needy folks so as to give ourselves in ministry with them however we can.

When we say "Yes" to God, Jesus claims, we are simultaneously saying "Yes" to the least, the last, the lost, and the lonely people God holds dear. So if we say "Yes" to God but then focus only on our own piety or on other people who are just like us, then we are essentially being like the son who said all the right things when Daddy asked but who turned right around and did nothing that the father really wanted.

"Follow through." That's the advice you'll hear in golf, in tennis, in baseball, and in hockey. That your follow-through changes everything. But how can it? After all, the ball or the puck is long gone by the time you're done with your swing. But here's the thing: In order to *not* follow through, you have to start slowing down before you're done hitting the ball or the puck. While the follow-through itself is just part of the greater swing, it's the evidence that you did the



best you could in the moment and proof of your commitment to serve others as God has called you to do. Indeed, it's all about the follow-through.

## **Pastoral Prayer**

Bound together in Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit, let us pray with one heart and mind to our God, saying: *God of all mercies, hear our prayer.*

That the love that passes ceaselessly between the Father and the Son in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit may renew and deepen the life of each Christian and draw us all gathered here into your unending life, we pray: *God of all mercies, hear our prayer.*

For the leaders of the church and for the leaders of nations, that they may discern ways to overcome divisions and mistrust and may reflect your unity in every aspect of common life, we pray: *God of all mercies, hear our prayer.*

For our families, our households, and our communities, that they may be places of communion and mutual support, which build us up and strengthen us in grace and truth, we pray: *God of all mercies, hear our prayer.*

Thankful for our world that you made through Christ and renewed in the power of the resurrection, that we may be wise and careful stewards of creation, we pray: *God of all mercies, hear our prayer.*

In the power of the Spirit, who joins our prayers to Christ's enduring intercession, we pray for the sick, the suffering, and all who stand in need. For healing for all the world, we pray: *God of all mercies, hear our prayer.*

Gracious God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father, accept our prayers this day. By the inner workings of your Spirit, deepen our communion with you, the source and goal of our life, and make us more and more signs of your enduring love. This we pray through Christ, who lives and works with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

## **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

**Sending Hymn**

***Lord of the Dance***

**Jackie Livesay**

## **Commission & Blessing**

We have heard Jesus' disturbing statement:

notorious sinners may be ahead of us in entering the kingdom of God.

Let these hard words wake us up from our smug self-contentment or

complacency and make us aware that our life too is a mixture of "yes" and "no,"

of an honest seeking to do what is right together with moments of timidity.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

let us go in the peace and the love of Christ. Thanks be to God!