

Sermon for September 28, 2014
Matthew 21:23-32

What if you were able to see yourself as others see you—would it change you or would you stay the same? That happened one morning when a gentleman of some means opened up the newspaper and read that he had died the day before! The paper's error gave the man a unique opportunity to read what people would say about him after his passing.

So he began to read. He read past the bold caption that stated: "Dynamite king dies," to the text itself. He was taken aback to find that he was described as "a merchant of death," for he had invented dynamite and had become quite rich from it.

The description of him in the newspaper sparked a change in the man. Did he really want to be remembered for getting rich by causing death and destruction? In that moment, he experienced a healing power greater than the destructive power of dynamite. He changed his life's direction and devoted his energy and money to works of peace and the betterment of humanity. Today, he is best remembered as the founder of the Nobel Peace Prize—Alfred Noble—all because he had the grace-filled opportunity to see himself as others saw him and the freedom to set his life in a different direction.

Repentance is more than just a changing of our minds; it is a changing of our hearts—of what we care about and it is grace that gives us that opportunity for change—a change that can be awesome and terrifying all at the same time. Martin Luther claimed that law and gospel should be preached together; you

can't have one without the other. The law gives us the mirror we need to see our faults while the gospel—grace; allows us to change.

Alfred Noble had a change of heart just as the first son in today's parable had a change of heart. And their actions showed that change. Remember that Jesus asked the Pharisees which son **did** the father's will because if we get right down to it both sons are wrong. The first son shamed his father in public by telling him no; while the second son dishonored him privately by not following through with his promise. Like it or not our actions speak louder than our words.

I think that it would be safe to say that for most of us here today our first answer to God's callings in our lives hasn't always been a yes. I tell my own story not because it's more important than others but because I know it so well and I won't get into trouble telling it.

Many of you know that when I first felt a call to ordained ministry my answer to God went something like this—Are you crazy!? I had plenty of reasons and excuses why I shouldn't say yes, but God is very patient and soon my reasons and excuses were no longer valid. One of the reasons I had a change of heart was because I was able to see myself through the eyes of others. My former pastor, who knew how stubborn I could be, realized that the more he kept after me to go to seminary the more I dug my heels in and said no. So he arranged to have me preach and lead worship while he was on vacation. And then it happened—other people came up to me after worship and told me how they saw me as a pastor and asked me why I wasn't in seminary. I of course told them not

to tell Pastor Jack what they told me, but seeing myself through their eyes began to have a change on me.

But repentance is also a grace filled gift because it leads us back to the grace of God, where we are reminded that we are not bound by what we have done or not done in the past. Our salvation isn't dependant on what we do but on the action of him "who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father."

And while our salvation doesn't depend on what we do; the question becomes, "What should our lives look like now that we have been freed from the burden of sin and death and freed for the sake of our neighbors?" What do we do with such unlimited grace—a grace that not only judges, but forgives, a grace that includes those who are insiders and those considered outsiders? Where is God giving us a second, third, fourth or four hundred and ninetieth chance to get it right, to change our hearts and answer the call? That's the wonderful thing about God's grace—it's always there ready to forgive and give us a new heart—no matter how many times we ask!