Matthew 21: 23-32: The Authority of Grace

In today's Gospel, Jesus is talking with the religious leaders in the temple, He has been teaching there, and his teaching disturbs them. They question his credentials, asking: "By what authority are you doing these things?" They want to know who taught him to talk with such authority, not as a good student, repeating his lessons, but as an expert, one who truly knows. They feel threatened because Jesus' teaching has exposed the distance between what these leaders say and what they actually do.

The religious leaders have used their authority, bestowed by long tradition, to enhance their own prestige at the expense of the people they are charged to lead and care for. But their self-serving actions are not consistent with real authority. Real authority includes responsibility. Real authority inspires trust. Jesus's teaching is reliable and trustworthy. He tells the truth about what needs to change, but he does not use that truth to humiliate or exclude. His authority makes room for honesty, repentance, healing, and a new beginning.

Although he will not answer the leaders' question, Jesus continues the conversation, asking them their opinion on a story he is about to tell: a father asks his two sons to work in the vineyard. One says no but later changes his mind and goes to work. The other says yes but never follows through. Who, Jesus asks, is the son who did his father's will? The religious leaders are relieved. This is an easy question to answer. Until, that is, Jesus helps them to see that they are NOT the first son in the story, but the second. They are the son who said yes – but never followed through. The point is not difficult to understand, but it is difficult to live, Saying the right thing is not the same as doing it. In our lives, we can have faith, we can affirm the right beliefs, and yet still resist the particular act of love or obedience God places before us.

For me, the good news of this parable is that the first son's "no" was not the end of his story. He reconsidered, changed direction, and went. In this parable Jesus gives us a picture of faithfulness that does not require us be perfect. On the contrary, he shows that faithful discipleship is about being willing to admit when we are wrong, about being humble enough to receive God's forgiveness, and persistent enough to try again. ***This*** is grace: God does not hold our past refusals, our pride, or our excuses against us. God keeps opening the door and inviting us to turn toward him.

Most often, that turning happens in small and ordinary ways. It may be the phone call I have been putting off, the apology I need to offer, the person I have been avoiding, the judgment I need to release, or the kindness I can choose when no one is watching. These actions may not look impressive, but they are often where discipleship becomes real. They are the places where our spoken "yes" to God begins to take shape in our lives.

This week, let us all ask ourselves the honest question: “Where have I said yes to God with my words, but not yet with my life?“ We do not have to fix everything at once. We give thanks that through God’s grace, it is never too late to change our minds, never too late to take one faithful step. And when we do, we go into the vineyard as we are called. Thanks be to Jesus that his authority is the authority that offers us second chances – and third, and fourth…. Amen.