

**Meeting Jesus again + Matthew 21: 23-32**  
**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, September 28, 2008**  
**Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA - Pastor Roy Almquist**

I don't know about you, but I have known Jesus for a very long time. No doubt many of you can say the same. Those of us who were raised in the Church met Jesus when we were young, and, no doubt, we have a special image of Jesus etched into our consciousness. I grew up in a congregation that had a large stained-glass window of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and I looked at that window every Sunday, sitting in my father's lap. I also had a picture in my room of Jesus, standing behind a boy and helping him pilot a ship through a stormy sea. These images have informed my faith. Many of you have had parallel experiences.

But the simple fact is that for many people, their childhood images do not seem as compelling as they did when they were young. They may not have rejected what they believed in their earlier days, but that faith is not the centering force it may have been when their world was smaller.

- For many Jesus seems outdated or childish, a lovely concept, like Mother Goose or the Easter Bunny, but not a defining force in their lives.
- For others Jesus is joined to a long list of things they just do not believe any more .. like a six-day creation, a talking snake, a man swallowed by a fish, or a large body of water separating to provide escape for chosen people.

Now the Bible stories of Sunday School have new interpretations for adults, but, alas, few people make time for their faith to be formed through the study of Scripture and so a lot of folks are stumbling, trying to address their mid-life crises with a faith that was formed when they were fourteen!

Regardless of where you are on this continuum, I think you need to meet Jesus again .. maybe for the first time. I feel strongly that the greatest gauge for whether the Lutheran church in general or Calvary Lutheran Church in particular will succeed or fail in the Twenty-first century is the degree to which we can help people meet Jesus Christ .. for the first time or for a new time.

As we meet Jesus as adults, we must move beyond a sentimental image of Jesus. We need to know Jesus as the one who shows us how we ought to live our lives and calls us to assume a proper place in God's Kingdom. We need to know Jesus as the one who demonstrates for us what it means to live for others.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning provides a wonderful opportunity for us to meet Jesus and move from a faith based on beliefs to a faith based on relationships.

The Parable of the Two Sons and the Vineyard is a very human story. Anyone who has been a parent can identify with it. In the never-ending economy of farm life, the father needed the help of his two sons, probably teenagers, to complete a task in the vineyard. One son rudely refused his father's request, but then changed his mind and fulfilled the work assignment. The other son responded politely to his father, giving him a false assurance, but then refused to carry out the task he had assumed.

This parable praises no one. William Barclay calls it *The Parable of the Better of Two Bad Sons*. Neither son is the kind of child who would bring unmitigated joy to a parent. Both were self-focused and ungracious. But the one who in the end obeyed was incalculably better than the one who lived only for himself. Jesus wants us to understand the power that is present when a person chooses to embrace God's will and purpose.

Nothing much has changed since Jesus told this story. The world can still be divided into those whose profession is better than their performance, and those whose performance is more impressive than their profession. Some of us talk it .. some of us walk it. Jesus told this story to challenge the religious people of his day - people who were publicly pious, considered themselves exemplary citizens, but simply were not living lives of kindness and generosity.

We can be certain that Jesus got their attention when he told them: *the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you* [Matthew 21: 32]. I am sure you will not be surprised to learn that Jesus said these words on the Monday before he was crucified.

This text is a challenge to us as individuals but I think it also challenges us as a Christian congregation. If we are not careful, our congregation can easily become self-involved, resistant toward fulfilling the Great Commission to witness to Jesus Christ. Left to our own devices we can easily gravitate toward our comfort zone and wind up being members of an ecclesial social club with chaplains and member privileges.

Barbara Brown Taylor, my favorite preacher and a seminary professor in Atlanta, cites a wonderful illustration from Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*. In the story a young native boy named Kitau appeared at Dinesen's door in Nairobi, asking the writer if he might work for her. Dinesen said yes and the boy turned out to be a fine servant. But after only three months he came to her and asked for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim in Mombassa. Upset at the thought of losing this excellent houseboy, Dinesen

offered to pay him more, but the young man was firm in his intention to leave.

Kitau explained to Dinesen his decision to reject the tribal worship of his youth and become either a Christian or a Muslim. He said that his sole purpose in working for her was to see the ways and habits of Christians up close. He had determined that he would now live for three months with Sheik Ali to get a similar exposure to Islam and then he would make his decision.

Dinesen expressed her surprise by saying: *I believe that even an Archbishop, when he had had these facts laid before him, would have said, or at least thought, as I said: "Good Lord, Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here."*

[Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, 190]

If Calvary Lutheran Church is to fulfill its mission and be a vital Christian fellowship in the Twenty-first century, we need to be mindful that the world is watching us and what we do. For many of those who come to our church today are like that son, who said no, but then wound up going the vineyard. Many, like the young man in Isak Dineson's story, are ready for us to show them what it means to be a fully committed follower of Jesus Christ. The only problem is that we cannot fake it. We must be authentic.

- Many people who come to Calvary as visitors have no background in the Church. Some have never been baptized; they have no memory of Sunday School, a youth group, or a Bible study. They may not have met Jesus but they are drawn to Him. What they know about him they like and they want to learn more. Can we teach them?
- Many people who come as visitors are spiritual people, who pray and meditate on a regular basis, but have no worship tradition. They do not understand the meaning of Holy Communion or why we recite a Creed or the purpose of the pastor's sermon.
- Many who come to Calvary are not *agnostics* but *ignostics* .. they simply do not know or understand what it means to be in a Christian community. We need to welcome them and introduce them to our friend Jesus .. assuming we know him already!

This is a wonderful time to be the Church, but it is a challenging time. Let us remember that the most important thing is not *what we want and what we like*. It is how we will answer the question: Will you go to the vineyard? Will you serve him? I pray that the people of Calvary Lutheran Church will say .. Yes! .. and will go. Amen.