Room to Change

Matthew 21:23–32; Philippians 2:1–13

There is a particular kind of quiet that comes after you realize you owe someone an apology. The conversation is over. You're putting a plate in the dishwasher. And something the other person said begins to sound different. You were so busy explaining yourself that you didn't really hear it. Now you do.

You could go back. They may still be in the next room. But first you have to get past that voice inside you: "If I go back now, I'll have to admit I was wrong." So you stand there, holding the plate. Sometimes the hardest distance to travel is across your own kitchen.

Jesus tells a story about a father who asks his son to work in the vineyard. "I will not," the son says. But later he changes his mind and goes. The father asks his other son the same thing. "I go, sir," he answers. Respectful. Agreeable. But he doesn't go.

Jesus asks which son did the father's will. "The first," his listeners answer. They can see it plainly when it's somebody else's family. So can we.

But Jesus is teaching in the temple, and his listeners are chief priests and elders who have challenged his authority. Who gave him the right to do what he is doing? Jesus asks them about John the Baptist. Was John's baptism from heaven, or was it a human undertaking? They begin calculating. If they say heaven, Jesus will ask why they didn't believe him. If they say human, they're afraid of the crowd. The question of what is true gets crowded out by the question of what is safe. They say they don't know.

Then Jesus tells his story. After they give the right answer, he tells them that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God's kingdom ahead of them. Those people believed John. The leaders did not. And even after seeing those people respond, the leaders would not reconsider and believe.

We sometimes imagine that if God's work were clearer, faith would come more easily. Here, the leaders have seen something that challenges their judgment. They remain unmoved. Jesus does not tell us the whole story of those who believed John. He tells us that people the leaders look down upon have responded to God's messenger. The leaders' religious standing cannot answer for them. They must believe, too.

I cannot preach this as though religious leaders are somebody else. I'm standing here in a robe. I make my living saying words about God. I know how to make a sentence sound faithful. Will I let Jesus correct me? Could I recognize that someone I dismissed has responded to God while I am still finding reasons to resist?

We can become so certain about someone that nothing they do is allowed to surprise us. We know their history. We may have stopped paying attention to their life. Jesus' words should make us careful about deciding whom God can reach—and who still needs to change.

A congregation can face that question. We may have settled long ago who is wise, who is difficult, whose opinion carries weight. Then someone we habitually talk past says something we would rather dismiss. They may be wrong. Listening does not require agreement. But we cannot honestly examine their words while refusing any possibility that they might correct us. Could they be naming a distance between what we confess and how we live? Would we let that truth change a decision?

There is a kind of humility that will admit a mistake while keeping everyone in their assigned places. I apologize. You accept. I remain the person who understands how things ought to be. We can say the gracious words and leave everything untouched.

The second son knows how to give a respectful answer. The first son goes to the vineyard. His refusal was real. It did not have to become his final response. He went where his father had asked him to go.

That brings us back to the kitchen. Suppose the person in the next room has said, “You ask what I think, but you have already decided.” We can apologize for sounding impatient and leave the decision untouched. Or we can hear what they have actually told us. Perhaps we have been calling something a conversation while allowing ourselves the only voice that matters.

Going back could mean saying, “I didn’t give you a chance. Tell me what I haven’t understood.” Then letting their answer matter. We have not finished listening if the other person’s answer cannot change anything.

For those of us who have caused hurt, that is costly. We may have to change a decision we have already announced. We cannot control how quickly trust returns. The vineyard contains work.

Paul writes to a church learning how to live together. He asks them to attend to one another’s interests, and he directs their attention to Jesus. Christ takes the place of a servant. He becomes obedient to the point of death on a cross.

The Lord whose authority we confess has given himself for us. His love has carried him into the depths of human sin and suffering. He knows what our refusals cost. When we admit our failure, Christ does not become less faithful to us. We may lose the satisfaction of being right. We do not lose our belonging to Christ.

And Paul tells this community that God is at work within them, enabling their willing and their doing. We need that promise where we feel least willing. We can ask God for help before we have managed to want the change we need. We can listen with our pride still stinging. We can begin to repair harm while we are still learning how. Together, we can become a church where telling the truth about our failures opens a way toward repair.

Perhaps this week it begins with a sentence we can barely get out. “I’ve been thinking about what you said.” Then enough quiet to hear the answer. The person in the next room does not owe us immediate reassurance. We can hear their hurt without asking them to comfort us.

So when you find yourself standing in that kitchen, holding that plate, you do not have to prove you were right before you move. The Christ who knows the truth about you has given himself for you.

You can put the plate down. You can go back into the room. His mercy is enough to let you begin with the truth.