

Lectionary 26 Year A 2020
September 27, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Quite often in devotions and Bible study materials, I come across the question, “What is God’s will for your life?” or something along those lines. And what I have found is that in many cases, this is an incredibly difficult question for us to answer. One of the prayers that we use in our council meetings, and sometimes for midweek services admits this very truth: “O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.” We don’t always know where God is leading us, or what exactly God wants for our lives. It can certainly be hard to know at times. Yet despite our not knowing God’s will, we also pray in the Lord’s Prayer each week—or perhaps even daily, that God’s will be done.

But there are also times that we *do* know God’s will for us, but we don’t want to do or admit it because it’s outside our comfort zone and we don’t want to go. For example, we don’t always want to admit when we feel God calling us to speak out against violence, racism and oppression.

There are certainly times in our lives when we’ve promised other people that we’ll do something, and then failed to keep that promise, or when we’ve said that we wouldn’t do something, but eventually did it anyway. In the political season we’re in, we can certainly point to politicians that are making all kinds of promises right now, and we know full well that most of these promises will be ignored after the election. We can point to these examples in our culture and our own selves, but we can also point to these examples in our relationship with God.

Sometimes we hear God calling us, and we simply respond “no.” We won’t do what God wants us to do. Perhaps it’s too hard. Perhaps it’s outside our comfort zone or we’re afraid. Perhaps we just don’t have the time or we just don’t care. Perhaps we don’t really know where God is leading us, and we don’t want to fully commit to an unknown future. We know what we *should* do, but we refuse to do it. For one reason or another, we likely have all said no to God at least once in our lives.

On the other hand, perhaps we have felt God calling us to do something, and we say we’re going to do it, but we never follow through. Maybe God has called us to make amends with a friend or family member, and we agree that it’s important—but we never actually get up the courage to do it. Or maybe God is calling us to stand up for someone at work or school who is being treated unfairly, but we’re too afraid to say anything.

In times like these, when we fail to do God’s will in word and deed, I think we might be able to identify with the two sons in today’s gospel reading. But when I hear this gospel passage, one of the things I hear is a message of hope for us when we find ourselves struggling to respond to God’s will for our lives. You see, in today’s gospel story, Jesus encounters the chief priests and elders, and Jesus tells them a parable about a father who had two sons. The father needed the sons to go and work in the vineyard. The first son refused to go, but later changed his mind and went. The second son said he would go, but never went to work in the vineyard. When Jesus asks the chief priests and elders who has done the will of the father, they believe that the one who eventually did the work had done the father’s will. But Jesus seems to have a different idea, and in truth, neither son fully did their father’s will.

Jesus points out that, like the second son, the prostitutes and tax collectors will enter the kingdom of God ahead of the religious officials, because they have heard and internalized God’s

word, even if they struggle to put it into action. There is hope for them because like the second son, their hearts are in the right place, and even though their actions fall short, God's love and forgiveness is abundant for them.

On the other hand, the chief priests and elders walk the walk and talk the talk, they look like righteous and faithful people, but their hearts are in the wrong place. They appear to say yes to God, but they have ignored God's prophet John the Baptist and his call for repentance. Jesus points out that the chief priests and elders are not faultless, but are even more misguided than some of the least in their society.

But there is also hope for them. There is hope for the chief priests and elders, and for those like the first son, who was so quick to refuse to help his father. The eventually did change his mind, and he got to work—he eventually heard, believed, and responded to his father's will. There is hope that it's never too late to hear and respond to the grace of the Gospel. There is hope that one's past actions or current status do not determine one's future. There is hope even for the chief priests and elders. Even though Jesus says that the tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom ahead of them, *they still get to enter the kingdom*. God still has love and life for the chief priests and elders and the first son.

And so, there is hope in this parable for all people. There is hope especially for those people that the chief priests, and elders, and churches and pastors and congregations love to exclude. There is hope for those people that don't look like Christians on the outside, those people whom churches have given up on and have decided are outside the love of God. There is hope for all people who struggle with their faith and struggle to respond to God's will for their lives. There is hope because we see in today's gospel reading that they are never, ever beyond the reach of God.

In today's gospel reading we see that no matter what may have happened in the past, God is always willing to welcome us and stir the Spirit within us so that we can respond to God's call for our lives. God is always working in us, and working on our hearts—even after we have said no to God or turned away from God's call.

And the truth is that whether we identify more with the first or second son, we are all equally in need of God's welcome, forgiveness and love, because we have all fallen short of God's desires for our lives. And so, we hear the proclamation and promise from God in Ezekiel, "Turn, then, and live." We are called to turn back toward God, to listen and discern God's will for our lives. And we have the promise that God grants us the gift of eternal life no matter how well we are able to live out God's will. We know that God will not let go of us even when, like the sons in the gospel reading, we are unwilling or unable to hear how God wants to use us in the world. And we know that God will always be present with us, guiding us and encouraging us to step onto God's path for our lives and immerse ourselves in the journey that God has planned for us. When we fall short of God's will, we can trust in God's promise that there is abundant love and forgiveness for each of us, that there is room in the kingdom for everyone, and that God will keep calling us to serve no matter how many times we turn away.

God calls us to service, God calls us to do God's will. And it is never too late to live more fully into God's call for our lives. It is never too late to live more generously. It is never too late to pray more fervently. It is never too late to serve more regularly. God is always present with us, seeking us out and encouraging us to respond to God's will. And God will walk with us, loving and forgiving us every step of the way. Thanks be to God. Amen.