

Reformation Living: “Changing Our Minds”

Matthew 21:23-32

October 1, 2017

Every day we make decisions, and every day we change our minds – sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. A teenager was very nervous about an upcoming science test. So that morning, he took a pen and wrote some notes on his hand to help him with the test. On his way to class he thinks about what his mom would say and he starts to have a change of heart. As he is about to walk into class, he decides to go to the bathroom first, and there he washes the notes off his hand. He then goes to his classroom and takes his seat – ready to take the test. His plan was to cheat, but he changed his mind.

Every day we are faced with those kinds of decisions. We make countless decisions about how faithful we are going to be to God. Every day we are faced with the dilemma of how much we’re going to allow Jesus to shape how we act toward others. Every day we flirt with and fight against temptation. Sometimes we say yes to temptation, sometimes we say no; and sometimes we actually do change our minds – sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse.

In our Gospel lesson for today a father asked one of his sons to go and work in his vineyard. Now I would guess that this was a very simple or normal request in those days. It was probably as common as any of us asking our children or grandchildren to clean their room or do their homework or walk the dog. But when this father asked his son to go and work in the vineyard, the son said, “No.” I’m sure the son was very familiar with the work that was involved in the vineyard, but He didn’t want to do any chores. Jesus compared this son to tax collectors and prostitutes. Everyone in those days knew that tax collectors and prostitutes lived their lives in a blatantly immoral way in order to get a lot of money. They knew what God wanted them to do, but they rejected God’s will by basically saying with their lifestyles, “I am not going to live the way God wants me to live.” Later, though, this son obviously felt bad as he knew his father wasn’t asking too much, so he changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard.

The father then asked his other son the same question, and this son said, “Sure, dad, yes sir,” but he didn’t go. Unfortunately, this son also changed his mind. I’m sure he thought about working out in the vineyard – the dirt, the hot sun, the long hours, but then he obviously decided that he didn’t want to do that – forget it. Jesus compares this second son to the chief priests and the elders he was speaking to at the moment. While these guys were all about hard work and commitment as they were the religious leaders of the land, the kind of work the father was asking his son to do was beneath them, in their opinion. That kind of work would involve humility, and they were not willing to humble themselves and admit they were sinners just like those tax collectors and prostitutes, who needed God’s forgiveness. As far as they were concerned, they didn’t need forgiveness. God should be very pleased with their hard work and holy lifestyle.

So when Jesus asks these religious leaders, “Which of the two did the will of his father?” and they reply, “the first,” – meaning the one who initially said, “no,” but then changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard, the point is quickly made that what we say is not always as important as what we do.

I know all of us can relate to both of these sons, because we know what it’s like to change our minds. Our loving God has asked all of us to go and live Christian lives, namely to be holy in an unholy world, to love those who are unlovable, and to be a reflection of Jesus to everyone we meet every day. And we all say in a variety of ways, “Yes, Father, I’ll do as You ask. I’ll let Jesus be reflected in my life for all people to see.”

But then, 5 minutes after walking out of this place of worship, some husbands and wives start fighting just like always. Or our renewed enthusiasm to be faithful Christians can disappear the moment we walk outside. Or our thoughts can be filled with all sorts of sinful desires before we ever get out of the car at home. How often do we say to God, “Sure, God, I’ll do what you ask, I’ll be faithful to you,” but then we change our minds before we even get home? I’m sure God never holds His breath too long, because He knows how we are when it comes to keeping our promises.

God asks us to do some tough things, but Jesus knows what it’s like for us to struggle with what God the Father asks of us. There was a time, before any of us were born, when God the Father spoke to His Son, Jesus, and said, “Son, I love you, but I have a very hard chore for you to do. I need you to go to work today, to go to earth. I need you to become a human being. In particular, I need you to be born as an infant, and to grow up with sinful people. I need you to heal people, preach to them, and teach them, even though they may not always

welcome you. And later I need you to be beaten by whips, crowned with thorns, and then, Son, I'm so sorry to ask this of you, but I need you to die in their place, on a cross, so that these sinful people can live with us forever. Will you do this for me?"

Even though this job was so awful, Jesus obviously said, "Yes, Father, I will do it." What God asked was hard, no doubt about it, and we read in the Bible that Jesus wrestled with it, He struggled on the night that He had His last supper with His disciples. But He never changed His mind. He did exactly what God asked Him to do, because He loved His Father and He loves us, and knows us. He knows we will often change our minds, sometimes for good and sometimes for bad. He knows we will be tempted to cheat, whether it's on a test, or on our taxes, or in our marriage. He knows that we are sinners and that there will be moments when we find ourselves knowing what's right in God's eyes and yet knowing we're doing the exact opposite. But every day when we're faced with the struggle of what to do, Jesus will always be right there saying to us, "Remember me. Remember what I did for you on the cross. You don't have to make the wrong choices anymore. I am your strength. My body and blood that I give you at the altar will strengthen you. The new life that I have poured over you in Baptism will refresh you. The people I surround you with in your church family are there to support you. And I am always with you."

500 years ago, a young monk named Martin Luther in a small town in Germany was hurt and upset that the leaders of the Church had changed their minds and were no longer teaching what the Bible said about eternal life being a free gift of God through Jesus' death and resurrection. Instead, they sought to take advantage of the people, who couldn't read the Bible, by insisting that eternal life in heaven had to be purchased with money. So Luther challenged the Church leaders by posting 95 statements as to why their practice of earning eternal life in heaven through good works was wrong. And he pleaded with them, despite his life being threatened, to change their minds and to go back to what the Bible said about eternal life. Some leaders did not change, but many did, and the Church around the world then went through a massive reform to insure that the word of God would always be taught accurately, for all to read and to hear.

Every day when we're faced with the choice to do the right thing, what God wants us to do, Jesus will be there with us. Even though we may change our minds and do the wrong thing, Jesus will never let go of us. He will never change His mind about saving us. He will never change his mind about forgiving us. And He will never, ever change His mind about raising us from the dead. Isn't that great to know?

Isn't it great to know that we, who change our minds at the drop of a hat, have a Savior who loves us so much that He will never change His mind, no matter what we do? Through Jesus' death and resurrection we can stand before God as His holy, innocent, righteous people, knowing that regardless of our past, eternal life is ours. That's a promise, and God will never change His mind about His promises and about us.