

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sept 27, 2026
Gospel: Matthew 21:23-32
St. Michael's Church
The Rev. Joshua Wong

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our generous and powerful God. Amen.

Good morning. I have a question for you. What do you think about the two sons we read in today's gospel? Have you ever met a child that acted like them? "No, I don't want to..." then after a time of rebellion, goes and does his homework. Or, "Yes, mom, I'll clean my room," and never does it.

The Rev. Debi Thomas, an Episcopal priest, shared a story about herself when she was four years old. An elderly couple from her father's church invited them over for dinner. As the only child in the group, she soon became bored and the host gave her crayons and paper to draw at a nearby desk. That got boring after a while, so she started exploring the contents of the drawers. There she found a huge collection of keychains. There were many beautiful keychains, but she fell in love with a gold chain that featured three tiny ice cream cones in bright, glittery colors — one chocolate, one strawberry, and one vanilla. Without giving it a second thought, she slipped the keychain into her pocket.

When it was time for bed, her parents discovered what was in her pocket and began to question her. Her father told her she had to call the couple immediately, say sorry, and return the chain the next morning. She said no. She thought to herself that the parishioners had many keychains, they plainly didn't care about them since the chains were all jumbled together in the drawer. The ice cream keychain was meant to appeal to kids, and she was a kid. So why did she need to apologize?

After a long dragged out battle, her father won. He called the couple and handed her the phone. She said a very unconvincing "sorry," and the next morning, she returned the keychain.

The lesson young Debi ended up learning was not the lesson her father hoped to teach. Unfortunately, the lesson she learned was that confession and obedience are primarily about saying the right things — the formulaic things. For years afterwards, she failed to understand that repentance is a multidimensional action between the heart, mind, soul, and body.

To get a fuller understanding of today's gospel, it's important to note that tensions that simmer throughout the gospel are now coming to a boil. This passage occurred on the Monday of what we now call Holy Week. Jesus has just spent the weekend entering Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, receiving the adoration of the crowds, cursing a fig tree, and slinging a whip around the temple to cleanse it of corruption while continuing to heal the the blind and the lame. In other words, Jesus just spent the weekend making holy trouble, and the religious establishment is furious with him. They can't believe this preacher's nerve, and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus' opponents hoped to discredit him and trap him into claiming his authority came from God, making him vulnerable to a charge of blasphemy.

Instead, Jesus asks them a question, that we heard read earlier. But the chief priests and elders know that if they admit that John the Baptist was a prophet sent by God, Jesus will ask them why they rejected John's teaching, and refused his invitation to repent and receive baptism. But, at the same time, they know that if they say John was nothing more than a self-deluded charlatan, their base — who love John — will turn on them. Because they cared more about their selfish

political motivation, they refuse to answer the question. So, Jesus dismisses the leaders right to question him, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

It is here that Jesus proceeds with the story of the father and his two sons to speak about their need to repent. You, Jesus tells the chief priests and elders, are like the second son in the story. You talk the talk, you make lofty promises, you speak fluent religious jargon, but when John came and offered you the good news of the kingdom, you refused to repent. They didn’t lack knowledge, but chose not to obey. Therefore, Jesus says, the prostitutes and tax collectors, the people at the bottom of your religious hierarchy of goodness and badness, will enter God’s kingdom ahead of you.

This type of parable is called a “mirror story.” Its purpose is to show the chief priests and elders who they truly are and how they are filled with their own righteousness. It remains a mirror story for us today. Jesus tells us that repentance is not lip service, or the promises we make, but it’s about whether we “walk the walk,” do our actions back up our words, to go and do the work that God asks of us to do.

Which begs the question of this whole parable: which child are we?

Are we the child who makes promises we fail to keep? The child who doesn't understand that repentance is a lifelong change of heart, mind and direction?

Or maybe, we are more like the first child who struggles with obedience, but finally comes to sorrow, remorse, and regret. What the parable suggests to the chief priests and the elders is that we all fall short, but what matters is the willingness to be open to changing our minds, our cares, and our lives. Without that willingness, all the social status, rank, or position in the world doesn't matter.

The chief priests and the elders appeared in public with a facade of holiness, but were actually full of self-righteousness. On the other hand, the prostitutes and tax collectors flocked to John and to Jesus because they were humble and needed God's mercy.

How seriously do we see our need for God’s mercy? How seriously do we see repentance? Are we like young Debi, who thought confession and obedience are primarily about saying the right things on Sunday, or do we see repentance as part of an integrated life— a life in which our words and our actions infuse, enrich, mirror, and reinforce each other during the rest of the week. A life that results in transformation.

What may you need to repent before God? Do you need to ask God for a humble heart in order to see your true self?

St. Ignatius once said, “Love shows itself more in actions than in words.” Our actions are the true test of our faith. Which child are we in this parable? Are we the rebellious child that acts because of having a transformed life? Or are we the child who makes promises we don’t keep? *Amen.*