

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2020
St. Paul's Wilmington, NC
A Sermon by the Rev'd Raymond J Hanna

A man received a parrot for this birthday. This particular parrot had an attitude problem. He was rude, offensive, and always in a bad mood, but he was an extremely intelligent bird. He knew every word of profanity in the English language and never hesitated to demonstrate his linguistic prowess. The parrot's language naturally distressed his new owner who insisted that the parrot change his ways and clean up his act. He even devised a plan to get the parrot to change his behavior. He started playing soft music to relieve any anxiety the parrot might be feeling. That didn't work. Then he decided to use positive reinforcement. Every time the parrot said something clean, he got a cracker. Unfortunately, positive reinforcement didn't change the parrot's proclivity for profanity. The parrot's owner then decided to take him to a hypnotist. That effort was also unsuccessful. Finally, the man was so fed up, that the next time the parrot started in his usual tirade, he picked him up, snook him and threw him into the freezer and slammed the door shut. He could hear the parrot squawking and cussing. After a while there was silence. He worried that he might have killed the parrot, so he opened the door and let him out of the freezer. The parrot was shivering and said: "I've changed. I promise never to use foul language again. I am so sorry for my unsuitable conduct and beg your forgiveness." The owner was elated. The parrot said. "Can I ask you a question?" Sure, the owner replied. The parrot said: "Tell me, what did the chicken do?"

What does it take to get you to change your mind about something, about anything? We all know folks who won't change their minds about anything. They are fixated on what they believe is right. We call them stubborn, or pigheaded, or worse. The chief

priests and elders, the righteous-upstanding citizens of Palestine we read about in today's gospel are the stubborn ones. They are the ones who refuse to change their minds about anything. They are wrapped in self-satisfaction. They see themselves as being on God's side and, nothing, not even the preaching of John the Baptist, can change their minds. Nothing can get them to believe that Jesus has the authority to teach as God. Jesus, they say, has no authority to teach, to heal, to forgive. He has no authority to question the status quo. How do you get someone to change their mind? It's really hard. If you don't believe me, try to get a Democrat or a Republican to change his or her mind.

We are quite ready for other people to change their minds, but we ourselves resist change. Occasionally, we come to the realization that some some portion of what we are doing or thinking is ultimately self destructive. But we really struggle to get to that point. That's why the disease of addiction is so hard to overcome. Addictive behavior is rooted in the fear of change. No matter how debilitating an addiction is, its familiarity its predictability, is security against facing the unknown. W.H. Auden said: "We would rather be ruined, then changed. We would rather die over dread, than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusion die."

Prostitutes and tax collectors, Jesus proclaims were able to let their illusions die. They were able to recognize that their actions were hurting themselves and hurting others. They were able to climb the cross of the moment and welcome God's grace and mercy and forgiveness. The chief priests and the elders, on the other hand, savor their illusions. They won't let them die and they refuse to see God (the very God they claim to follow) incarnate in Jesus.

Jesus goes on to tell a story about the benefits of changing one's mind. He tells the story about a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answers, "I will not, but later he changed his mind and went." The father went to the second son and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir; but he did not go." Which of the two sons, did the will of the father, Jesus asks?

“The first son,” they reply, “the one who changed his mind.” The one who decided that maybe his father had a better way of doing things.

Just like the chief priests and the elders, we sometimes get stuck in our own minds, and refuse to accept any evidence that points to the possibility of a new way of doing things— a way of healing and forgiveness and love and mercy.

One of the purposes of having an interim between rectors, is to create a space for people to explore what needs to change in the life of the community in order for us to go work in the Vineyard and produce more fruit. The work in the vineyard is hard, work. It demands sacrifice and commitment and faithfulness and a willingness to be uncomfortable, to set aside agendas or judgement, and be open to new possibilities. As Paul says, “we are to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but be humble, looking not to our own interests, but to the interest of others.” How ready are we to acknowledge that we are in this together, and we are here to encourage one another in Christ, to be joyful in the work we do, to create incentives to love one another and to be of the same mind? Not my mind, or your mind, but of the mind of Christ.

The essence of faith is rooted in conversion, a turning away from the old and moving toward the new, from the harmful toward the good. St. Francis reminds us that we are called to work for pardon where there is injury, faith where there is doubt, light where there is darkness.

Change is hard, work. There is a story about a Buddhist monk who visits New York City for the first time. He is excited that he can sneak in a non-vegetarian meal. So he rushes up to the first street vendor he sees and says ‘I’ll have a hot dog with everything. The vender fixes the hot dog and gives it to him and he hands the vendor a \$20 bill, but the vendor doesn’t give him any change. The monk asks, “where is my change?” The vendor replies, “change has to come from within.” Change has to come from within. It come with our heart’s desire and willingness to take a risk. To step out in

faith. To trust the work of the Spirit. Transformative, life-giving change comes when we choose to take up the cross, not just the cross of the moment, our own personal crosses, but when we take-up the cross of Jesus, the cross that says I will change so that I can live an abundant life and invite others to live that life too — a life marked by love, sacrifice, compassion, mercy and forgiveness.