

September 28 2014

Scripture Lessons ~

Psalm 25

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:28-32

Sermon *Passing the Buck*

What in the world does it mean, to be responsible? What does it mean to be responsible? Those stories in the areas of upstate New York have been in the newspapers for some time and now had protracted debated about environmental issues especially about low level radioactive waste. Two towns in one vicinity have been targeted by the state as possible sites for that low level radioactive waste for more than a year. The deciding commission has held all kinds of public hearings in different communities on its list and answered questions and responded to the hostility of the people who believed that they are not being dealt with fairly or truthfully in this process by the state. Now of course I am not suggesting that the state not be involved in finding ways of disposing of low level radioactive waste neither am I implying that the public should not be extremely concerned about how this disposal should take place. What I am saying is the issue is an extremely complex one, as many things, are and it calls for clear thinking and a lot of cooperation on the part of all parties involved. Both the public and the state authorities are implicated in this process. The state needs to be honest about what is known and what is not known about all aspects of the waste to be deposited of and the members of the public on the other hand must recognize if we are going to benefit from nuclear technology especially in this case, medical nuclear technology waste then we have to provide for the disposal of the waste that the technology generates in the end. In environmental matters as in any other matters being responsible sometimes means making hard decisions for the good of all of society. It may even mean accepting disposal sites (God forbid) in our own vicinity so that our grandchildren will not pay the price for a contaminated world later on. At the very least it is going to mean being part of an active helpful discussion. The discussion might mean finding alternative means for accomplishing those same medical goals without using that kind of risky technology.

Responsibility is what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel lesson from Matthew because within the context of Matthew 21 Jesus uses the parable of the two sons to answer his critics within the religious establishment, who asked him where in the world is his authority comes from. In response Jesus points out that

the real question has to do with how the individuals accept responsibilities when God makes the call. Jesus throughout his ministry as Matthew describes it, he presented himself as kind of reformer, the kind of follow up of the summation of everything that has happened in the Old Testament and in spite of his image he surprises everybody by surrounding himself by what most people would consider the riff raff of society. He surrounded himself with prostitutes, with tax collectors, with sinners (quote unquote) of every state and every description and what's more these people presumed to call Jesus their own. Lips that only used the name of God in vain before now praised God loudly in Jesus company. Those who had been from childhood on the other hand had been worshipping in the synagogue; had been worshipping in the temple, while others had been wasting their lives and their possession in the opinion of the Pharisees, seem at first glance to be completely overlooked by Jesus in this case. Jesus takes this point of view for a reason though, he had not come, he said, for the followers of the law but to those who had said no to God during the course of their lives. The good religious people and those who could get ahead without the law are furious with Jesus turning around their conventional ways of at looking at life.

So Jesus tells this parable. The story is really simple as I talked to the boys a little bit earlier. The sons were both asked to go into the vineyard to work one day. The second son said. "Sure, Pop, I'll go out and work for you" but what happened? He didn't do it. He said I'll go but he did not go. Then the first one in a pretty angry tone said, "Thank you Dad but I'm not in the mood." But after wards, what did he do? He went. Jesus ends the story by asking who did his father's work. His audience those good religious people were shocked and couldn't help but admit, it was the first one. The son who said no at first but then he went anyway. You know by the time Jesus was finished; he condemned them with their own words. The point is that decisive moment when we ourselves are asked to do the work; we are called to take responsibility to do our part in God's Kingdom. We tend to overlook that simple fact instead of taking responsibility it is so much easier to sort of divert attention from ourselves and to point the finger at others. It's the liberals or the conservatives, the politicians, the minorities, the labor unions, big business or whoever is at the present time than to accept the reality our own personal unwillingness or our own personal inability to work for God's kingdom ourselves. It is also easy to blame something impersonal out there like, The System is the problem, international disorder or drug cartels or multilevel corruption of educational institutions, multinational corporations or right now social media. All of these are at faults but in reality all this still boils down to each one of us and how we choose to deal with what comes our way during the course of life

You and I both know that much cries out for change in the world around us. We all recognize unjust political, social, economic situations in certain places as in Iran and Syria in the Middle East and in many areas that we would call improved structures in China or Russia. But then what about our country? What about our county? What about our own town? What about our own family? and finally what about ourselves? What changes are necessary a lot closer to home. When will us as Jesus puts it, “the log in our own eyes rather than focusing on the splinter in our neighbor’s eye.” Whether or not you agree with the message of the current protest movement in some major cities throughout our country right now all of us have to agree that we have a long ways to go for even our own society is the just place Jesus wants for our society to be. And changes don’t come about by themselves and changes no matter where they happen depends on our individual human decision. The decision whether to stop smoking or not buying any more products than we have to packaged in plastic or to be peacemakers at work, at home or at the office or anywhere in multitude of things that pretty hard things to do. And decisions sometimes hurt us and decisions initially might hurt somebody else.

We might need to change old custom ways of doing things. It might mean changing old custom ways of seeing other people around us but no one least of all, Jesus promised us an easy road to God’s kingdom. You know that low level radioactive waste might come to one of those little towns in upstate New York. A hospice center for Aids may end up being near someone who doesn’t want it there at all. Somebody has to pay the taxes necessary to educate our children and there maybe refugees, real human beings, that require us and nobody else on God’s green earth to be their sponsors as they arrive

President Truman kept a little sign on his oval office desk and then Jimmy Carter when he was President had that sign returned to Washington from the Truman Library. I saw it at one time; it has four little words printed on it. Do you know what they are? Four little words The Buck stops here! So the question remains what it means to be responsible. The father in the parable had some work that needed to be done. He doesn’t address the Labor Union. He doesn’t address a corporation. He asked instead, his sons, personally whether they were willing to do the work. Who is responsible? Who decides? Let us hope by God’s grace in those kinds of important decisions we as individuals and of the church will have to courage to say, The Buck stops here!