

Exodus 17:1-7  
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16  
Philippians 2:1-13  
Matthew 21:23-32

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*NO NO NO, I don't want to!*

That is actually what the reluctant first son says in the parable. He doesn't say, "I will not" or "I won't", which is what it says in 19 out of my 20 different translations of the New Testament. In the Greek, the boy says to his father, "No, I don't want to!" *No, I don't want to work anymore in your stinky old vineyard.*

This is interesting to me, because although "I will not" and "I won't" and "No, I don't want to!" are all ways of saying NO, "No, I don't want to!" gets *us*, I think, much closer to the experience. "No, mother, I don't want to play the piano for your dinner guests." "No, I don't want to sit on that lady's lap." "No, I don't want to dead head all your geraniums and pelargoniums. You have so *many!*" "No, I don't want to help with the dishes, polish the silver, sweep the driveway, wash the car." "No, I don't want to smile right now – I'm sad!"

I think we all know this reluctant son pretty well, don't we? Even if we never said some (or any) of these things out loud, we have surely said them in our heads, loud and clear. Once again, Jesus is using a parable, a riddle story, to mess with our minds (not to mention the chief priests' and elders'). He wants to push and prod us, to get us unstuck from our assumptions about what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad, what is truly needed and what is not. We know for sure he's setting a trap for us as soon as he begins the story with "What do you think?" In this parable of the two sons where yes means no and no means yes, the riddle is set up in ambiguous disorder, and we are left with no firm rules to hang on to. And that's exactly where Jesus wants us!

Andrew Greely once said: "If one wishes to eliminate uncertainty, tension, confusion, and disorder from one's life, there is no point in getting mixed up either with Yahweh or with Jesus of Nazareth."

While we are hearing the reluctant first son as impolite and back-talking and disrespectful to his father, Jesus is leading us down his primrose parable path in another direction altogether. As usual, he is trying to free us from relying on old assumptions that keep us bound, and to release our thinking and seeing, our consciousness, to a whole, new awareness of how different everything looks in the kingdom of heaven.

On Launching Sunday, I talked about one of the most amazing things in the Gospels, that we can miss so easily, especially if we have grown up in the church and feel like we know these stories inside and out. In all Jesus' parables he tries to describe for us what it's like in the kingdom of heaven because he wants us all to live there. (And remember, that kingdom he taught was not about after we die; it was not about any other place or any other time. Jesus told us over and over again that that kingdom can only be found within us.) The amazing thing is: when we read the words and parables of Jesus carefully, we have to conclude that Jesus actually believes we can live in the kingdom of heaven, this very moment, all the time. He really believes we are equipped to think the way he thinks and see the world and one another as he sees us. Whether you and I believe it or not, he really believes we can live with that kind of awareness, that we can live in the kingdom *infinitely more vast than our desires.*<sup>1</sup>

The parable of the two sons where yes means no and no means yes was meant to get all of us unstuck from a state of mind that assumes we know for sure how to judge what's good or bad for us.

For the people of the Exodus in today's reading, the wilderness itself had become no longer a place but a state of mind, a bleak and angry symbol of their dry life of mistrust. God used water out of a rock to get them unstuck from their wilderness thinking. They had to find out, time after time, that their rage and threats against Moses couldn't change the truth. The truth was (and is) that God's leading is not always going to move us directly toward the oases we have in mind, and that in God's kingdom, dry *rock* can turn out to *be* the water source. The entire Exodus story is about freedom and release from bondage; but maybe its strongest message of all is that liberation takes time and training and a whole lot of practice!

The reluctant son in Jesus' parable, with time and training and a whole lot of practice, can turn a "No, I don't want to!" into a YES – water from out of rock. And that kind of YES, Jesus says, can lead us right to the kingdom, right to the kingdom with tax collectors and prostitutes and God's own self. That YES that comes out of *noldon't wantto!* Is why the chief priests and elders cannot find the way. They, he says, are the *yessirlmonmyway* son. They have surface courtesy, and confidence that they stand for all the right things. But they *don't* yet have what they really need to get there from here, even though the kingdom is within them as it is within every one of us.

By now, you have probably guessed that we all have both these sons inside us – *noldon't wantto!* and *yessirlmonmyway*.

Matthew puts this story in the last week of Jesus' life right after he'd ridden into Jerusalem like a rock star, on a stolen donkey, and chased all the money-changing merchants out of the Temple, encountering – of course - increasing opposition from all the *yessirlmonmyway* sons, who knew all the temple orders of dogma and creed, but who couldn't see the kingdom of God when it was right in front of their eyes. So they thought they had to kill him, just as the Israelites in the wilderness of their hearts thought they had to kill Moses.

But all they really needed to do was let go of their own *noldontwantto* will – in the way of the reluctant son in the parable **and** the way of the reluctant son in the garden of Gethsemane - *who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself... being born in human likeness.* Because we do know that Jesus knew exactly what it is like for us to talk back like the reluctant son. Remember? *No No No. I don't want to! Please. Please. Take this cup from me. And then finally, yet, not my will but yours.*<sup>2</sup> Jesus found that he had what he needed to empty himself and come around to the kingdom of God within him. And he told the story of the two sons because he really believes that we do, too. That we are equipped to see the way he sees, choose the way he chooses; that we can live in the kingdom within that waits to heal us, even when all we can see around us is dry rock and wilderness.

In a world where yes means no and no means yes, the only way we can ever possibly find what is true is to let go of our will, leave all of its heavy trappings behind, and live in the kingdom of heaven, which is, believe me, *infinitely more vast than any desire we have ever known.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*

<sup>2</sup> Luke 22:42

<sup>3</sup> de Caussade, op.cit.