

2011 SYNOD ASSEMBLY



2011 Metro D.C. Synod Assembly

➤➤➤ Fall Session • September 24 • Lutheran Church of the Redeemer • McLean, Virginia

WORSHIP SERMON — Bishop Richard H. Graham

Gospel Text: *Matthew 21:23-32*

Jesus says, "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not;' but later he changed his mind and went."

Sometimes you just have to do differently, or to do over. Sometimes you just have to make a correction.

Early this summer I got to travel to Montana to be the ELCA representative to the Montana Synod assembly in Great Falls. I had a great time, and after the assembly I traveled around the state visiting Lutherans for a couple of days. This is how I got to tour a cattle ranch outside of Bozeman with the local pastor and with the Norwegian-American rancher whose family had had owned the place for about a hundred years. We rode in a big pickup truck all over the ranch, up and down valleys and along ridges, up above the snow line (and there was still snow in that part of Montana early in June). It was the strange cultural experience to sit by the window, with the pastor in the middle and the rancher driving and talking about his visits to Norway, the two of them telling jokes about Swen and Ole and Lena, in the midst of the wild American west, where there are lots of cattle on the range, and cowboys still work on horseback.

Anyway, coming down off the highest ground to the main road we passed through several smaller pastures separated by fences and gates. And for a while it seemed as though we stopped every hundred yards so the rancher could get out and swing the gate open, get back in the truck and drive us through, then get out and close the gate behind us. But I lived in the country for a while and I knew this wasn't the way it's supposed to go. I was riding shot-gun. I was supposed to be the gate guy. So at the last gate I said, "I got this one," and I jumped out and swung the gate open. It was heavier than I'd expected. The truck drove through onto the highway and stopped. And I swung the gate closed and chained it up tight. Then I looked over the gate at the truck and thought, "Hmmm, I'm pretty sure this is wrong." I had carefully chained myself in the pasture. I had to swing the gate open, walk through it, close it behind me, chain it up, and climb into the truck. I said as I got in, "We're not going to talk about this." The rancher said, "Well alright there, Bishop. We were just figuring maybe you have some Norskie in you after all."

I don't have any Norskie in me, but I know from this personal experience, and others, that sometimes you just have to do differently, or do over. Sometimes a radical correction is required or you're going to be stuck someplace forever. In the gospel lesson this afternoon Jesus is trying to help the people who came to him to get unstuck. He points out the absurdity of their position about John the Baptist, which is to say he asks them how open they are to actions of God through people outside their ordinary ministry structures. And he uses

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the little tiny parable of the two sons a man sends to his vineyard. One of these sons says he won't go, but does, and the other says he will go, but doesn't.

I'm not so interested right at the moment in the son who says he will go, but doesn't. He is, frankly, every single one of us much of the time. We are always saying we will do things, or even volunteering to do things, and then not doing them. We're used to this about ourselves; we make our peace with it the best we can.

But the son who says "No" and then does what is asked of him, this son is of great interest to me. What do you suppose motivates that behavior? Is it conscience? Is it some deeper understanding of actual self-interest? Is it the grace of God which makes it possible to say, "You know, I was wrong there." Sometimes you absolutely have to make some change. Literally or figuratively you are on the wrong side of the gate, and unless you correct the situation you are lost. But usually it's more subtle. You look at your situation and you realize that, regardless of what you have said or done in the past, you need to do differently now. And you discover, because the Lord is mysteriously good to us, that change is not just necessary, it is possible.

You know where I'm going with this. I am going to say that in our common life together, change is not just necessary, it is possible. We know, because of what we experience in the communities we have come from, because of what we experience in the communities of faith we come from, that change is required of us. Too many of the things we have taken for granted aren't right, or they aren't right any longer. We have been living off the legacy of the past, often without even bothering to understand exactly what that is. And we have been so set in our ways and so sure of ourselves that when Jesus has said to us, "Go and work in my vineyard," we have replied, "No, we're already doing what seems best to us, and if this doesn't count as working in your vineyard, we don't know what would, so no."

But increasingly, praise God, we are going to work in the vineyard any way. God has not abandoned us or turned aside from our prayers. God is changing us. And so in spite of what we might have preferred we are turning our congregations inside out, with pain and grief but also in hope and with excitement. We are letting people come among us who are different from us. We are realizing that bearing witness to the Lord Jesus in our deeds and our words is our holy task every day wherever we are. We are accepting the fact that living our Christian life will make us different than many other people in this anxious, fragmented, materialistic culture. We are learning that following Jesus means you have a lover's quarrel with this world, that you count on finding your true home in the world to come.

Anyway, it is always exactly the right time to follow the Lord Jesus. It is always exactly the right time to take up the task God gives us. Whatever we have said or done in the past, individually or together, now is the moment get out from behind whatever gate is holding us back, to go and to serve and to find in this service the joy that God made us for.

Praise be to this God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and for ever and ever. Amen.