

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Matthew 21:23-32

Philippians 2:1-13

“The Lord leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble in God’s way.” AMEN!

In a small town there stood
a beautiful church on the hill.

It’s steeple could be seen for miles.

The people of the congregation were respected.

The mayor was a member and
the choir sang at public events.

The pastor was invited to pray in the town square.

One day, the town began to change.

New people came to live there.

Some were from other countries and cultures,
with different religions.

Some with no religion at all.

People at the beautiful church on the hill
began to worry.

“We are losing our town,” Mr Grady said

at a church meeting.

“These changes arriving to our town is causing us to lose our way,” he said.

“What should we do?” Someone asked.

“We should pressure the town council to make rules.

Only people like us should be able to hold office.

Only Christians should be able to settle here
and people need to speak English to be here.”

The room grew quiet.

In the back sat an older woman named Ruth.

Ruth rarely spoke at meetings but when
she did people listened because her actions
were visible.

She'd spent years caring for people
who had nowhere else to go.

Ruth stood and opened her tattered Bible.

She read, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility regard others as better

than yourselves.

Let each of you look not to your own interests,
but to the interests of others.”

(Part of what we read today in Philippians.)

Ruth closed her Bible and asked a question.

“When Jesus saw people who
were different, afraid, poor, or of different religion -
did he demand they honor him first or
did he kneel down and serve them?”

Again, the room was quiet.

The decision was tabled until the next meeting.

Two days later a severe storm blew
through the town and one family was
particularly hard hit.

The Ahmed family had their roof torn open and
rain had soaked a corner of their home and
ruined furniture and the children’s clothes.

Mr. Grady said, “We have enough problems of
our own, and we cannot fix everyone’s house.”

But Ruth gathered a few people anyway and
they brought tarps, blankets, and clothing
for the children.

They spent the day tarping and removing
ruined furniture.

While some made sure the clothing was right
for the children, Ruth sat and listened
to the parents as they worried about
what would happen next.

At the end of the day, Mr Ahmed looked at
the group from the church and asked,

“Why have you helped us? You don’t even know us.”

Ruth didn’t need to open her Bible to answer.

She had this one memorized,
“Look not to your own interests,
but to the interest of others.”

Then with a quiet whisper only the parents
could hear she said,

“We want to do the will of the Father,
and do God’s work in the vineyard.” (Pause)

The news spread quickly about what
the church had done and even Mr. Grady
began to see that if faith meant

making sure people knew one group
was in charge and if faith makes us think

we are higher than our neighbors,
then we've forgotten the One who
came down to serve.

The church still prayed for its town.

The members still voted, spoke up, and
cared about public life.

But they stopped trying to take their town back
and began to ask a new question:

Now they ask, "Who is our neighbor and
how do we serve them?" (Pause)

These are the questions we pose to ourselves,
and to one another.

It is very much like the question Jesus asked of
the temple authorities at the
beginning of his parable.

“What do you think?” Or another way,

“How would you decide?”

Jesus posed this question to
powerful religious leaders in Jerusalem.

It is wise for us to know that today’s reading
comes right after Jesus overturned the tables
in the temple and cursed the fig tree for
not providing fruit to eat.

These temple officials had become focused
on raising money unjustly and forgetting
to provide a house of prayer.

They’d lost the focus and neglected caring
for those who were hungry and hurting.

These temple officials came questioning Jesus
but he turned the tables on them
with a question about John the Baptist.

The temple leaders saw the truth in the question,
but decided among themselves to not

answer out loud even though they
knew the answer in their hearts.

And their non-answer led Jesus to this short parable.

An odd little parable, really, about
a father with two sons.

He said to the first, or eldest son,
“Go and work in the vineyard.”

The vineyard image, or metaphor, applies
to Israel and the gift of the land given
to God’s people.

So, in essence, got out into the streets and work.

The order is given to both sons and one says,
“No,” but then later goes.

The other, younger one, says,
“I’ll go,” but then never does.

Jesus asked, “Which did the will of the father?”

And when the temple authorities answer correctly,

Jesus told them, “the tax collectors and prostitutes
are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

For they, the temple leaders, recognized the benefit,

or gift, of changing one's mind
to do good in the parable,

but they (at least up to that day) were unable
to apply the positive change to their own lives,
and be like the first son. (Pause)

So, who will you and I be like?

What is it in our own lives that
might need a second thought? (Pause)

The one who comes in righteousness will likely
not be the one you find behind the podium,
with suit/tie, dress slacks, or polished shoes.

They might even speak a different language
and not drive a car.

They'll likely not know the right words
to say to express their faith,
(like tax collectors and prostitutes)

but they have the power to
change their mind and do good.

To think and learn, and to decide to do
the right thing and go out into
the vineyard of the world and

do it.

AMEN!