

17th Sunday after Pentecost  
September 27th, 2020

“Better late than never to enter the kingdom of heaven!” (Matthew 21:29)  
By Rev. Ed Weber

“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,  
Today’s text is from our Gospel reading, Matthew 21:29

**“He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went.”**  
Here ends our text.

I. Don’t be a “Never Repenter”

“Sure, I’ll be there. You can count on me!” How many times has some one said that to you, only to not show up later? How many times have you promised to do something but didn’t follow through? If we’re invited to a celebration or gathering, our first reaction is to say “yes”. We don’t like to make people feel bad by saying “no”.

In today’s parable two sons gave different answers when asked by the father to go work in the vineyard. One said “yes”, and the other said “no”. The second son gave the answer the father wanted to hear. Yes, I’ll go. But, he didn’t give the father the work that he wanted to see. All talk and no action! He answered his father with a very respectful, “yes sir”, but disrespected him, by not following through on his promise.

The first son didn’t bother to patronize the father. He didn’t even show him respect by calling him “sir”. He just gave him a quick “no”. But later, he gave it some more consideration, regretted his response and went.

In the political world, there are those who are called “Never Trumpers”. They have vowed to never vote for President Trump. Their answer is no. Who knows if they change their minds and will vote for him in this election? As important it is to pray for our leaders, honor our leaders and live peaceable with others, Jesus wants all people to have His peace in His Kingdom of grace in this life and so enter His eternal Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus was telling the Jewish leaders to wake up from

their political aspirations of power on earth and believe in Him. Don't be a "Never Repenter"!

**"Which of the two did the will of the father?" Jesus asked.**

The answer was plain for all to see. Of course, it is the one who actually did what the father asked and didn't just talk about it. That's the answer that the chief priests and elders readily gave. But, this parable had greater consequences than not just keeping one's promise to one's fellow man. For the father in the parable represents God. And the consequences are eternal. The hammer falls and from the authoritative lips of Jesus come these strong words of rebuke.

**"Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him."**

**"Assuredly"**...the One with authority speaks. The chief priests and elders had sought to trap Jesus into proclaiming who He was by asking by what authority Jesus taught, did miracles and overturned the money changer tables. There was no need for Jesus to repeat Himself again. Jesus had plainly told them in John 10 that He was God's Son and they refused to believe in Him. They had picked up rocks to throw at Jesus, but He escaped from them.

They knew it and wanted to capture Jesus on charges of blasphemy. These were the "Never Repenters". Even after seeing the tax collectors and harlots lives dramatically changed by Jesus, they would not believe in the way of righteousness. For they clung with all their might to their own sinful self-righteousness.

Time was running out. This was the last call. This was Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus was in the temple one last time before His crucifixion – one last time of public teaching, healing, and saving lost sinners who would relent. "Last call", before it's too late to enter the Kingdom of God! Don't be "Never Repenters".

The Jewish people, the covenant nation, that God had chosen as His special son from whom would come the Messiah, gave a lot of "yes" answers to the father for many centuries. "Yes, I will believe in the one true God", for that is what it means to work in the vineyard. But, then they followed false gods and were punished. The

chief priests and elders became gods to themselves, trusting in their own righteousness.

In the parable of the “Workers in the Vineyard” that we heard last week, there were the complainers who bore the heat of the sun all day. Yes, the Jewish people were called first into the vineyard. But, they made it all about themselves and what they bore. “Take what is yours then and go away” Jesus said. For the Kingdom of God is about My grace, and not about our sinful works.

That was the message of John the Baptist. John pointed to Jesus for salvation!

For John said, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:10)** Jesus, the Messiah has come! **“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)** And in no uncertain terms John told the people, **“And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:34)**

And from Luke 7 we read **“And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors declared the righteousness of God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. 30 But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.”**

Tell me now, **“The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?”** Jesus asked. Having rejected the baptism of John, they couldn’t say it was from heaven. Yet, they feared the people who were there in the temple listening with them. Always looking out for themselves first! So their answer was **“We don’t know”.**

“Dunno?” Sounds like the kind of answer a child with cookie crumbs around the mouth gives when asked who ate the cookie from the cookie jar. Not me! Then who? Don’t ask me! Your guess is as good as mine! Beats me?

But this was not a laughing matter. It was the one thing that they needed to answer and answer correctly! Jesus described them with these words in Matthew 15, quoting Isaiah 29. **“Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying:**

**8 ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth,  
And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.  
9 And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ ”**

Lip service doesn't cut it. Genuine contrition and faith in Jesus alone saves. We too, are called to walk the walk of following Jesus and not just talk the talk. We are called to enter His vineyard by grace. Our salvation is given to us freely. And then as our epistle reminds us, we do the will of God as saved children of God.

**“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.** Yes, it is God who is working in us to do His good pleasure! Paul goes on...

**14 Do all things without complaining and disputing, 15 that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world”**

Are you sometimes like the second son who quickly answers “yes”, but doesn't actually do the will of God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength?

Again, we relent and our answer is “yes” for we have fallen short. And we gladly receive God's denarius of salvation because God always does what is right! God is good! The One who John the Baptist pointed out as the Lamb of God, did go to the cross on Good Friday and died for all people, including the tax collectors and harlots...including you and me poor miserable sinners as we are. It is better late than never to enter the Kingdom of God.

## II. Be late and always “relenters”

How many of us sometimes get surprised that time has slipped by as we are doing one more thing which then causes us to be late for our next appointment? Sometimes we are tempted to try to make up the time by speeding to our next appointment and putting ourselves at risk. Then, wisdom prevails, and we remember the saying “Better late, than never”. It's better to be late than get in a car wreck and not make it all!

Yes, the first son said no, but he later relented. He came late to the game. He missed the plane flight and forgot his football helmet. But at least he made it! He repented is what Jesus is saying. The tax collectors and harlots were received into the Kingdom of God by grace through the baptism of John.

So, our baptism saves us! We, the Gentiles, who came late to the game, still get the crumbs that fall from the Master's table. There is mercy for all people. It is better to be a late "relenter" instead of a "never repenter"!

For Jesus DID accomplish our salvation by giving His life for all three days after He spoke in the temple. As our epistle from Philippians 2 beautifully tells us,

**“who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”**

“Tell me one thing”, Jesus asks the elders and chief priests. Tell me one thing Jesus asks each of us. Just one thing...“Was John's baptism from heaven?” Was your baptism from heaven? For your baptism is the same baptism for the forgiveness of sins as John's baptism. It's exactly the same! And when you answer “yes, it's from heaven” then you are declaring that salvation has come to you from God above! He has washed you of your sins and made you His child! The Divine hand of God has reached down and saved your soul!

And when you say that John's baptism is from heaven, you are saying that the righteousness that is given you in your baptism is the righteousness of Jesus that He freely gave to the world by His death on the cross. Yes, Jesus came down from heaven and humbled Himself for you because He loved you! And this you know!!

It reminds me of a 60's song, by Sam Cooke called “Wonderful World”

Don't know much about history  
Don't know much biology  
Don't know much about a science book  
Don't know much about the French I took  
But I do know that I love you  
And I know that if you love me, too  
What a wonderful world this would be.

God's love in Christ for all people is what makes this a wonderful world even in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. It makes love between Christian friends and spouses most wonderful because there is Jesus in the middle, always forgiving His people.

This week we people honored Supreme Court Judge who some considered lived the “Supreme life”. Of course, the supreme, most wonderful life is only found in Jesus. The unrepentant Jews rejected Christ. They were “Never Repenters”. Jesus continued to call them to repentance on His last day of teaching in the temple. And Jesus continues to call us daily to repentant and receive His love and forgiveness. It’s never too late to repent. It’s never too late to relent, believe in Jesus and enter the Kingdom of Heaven by His mercy! Better early, better late, better always in Christ, than never in Christ! Amen.

**“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)**