

“Changing Our Mind”
Matthew 21:28-32

Last Tuesday night, Lori and I tuned in for the first of three presidential debates. As one who follows campaigns with a mix of fascination and dismay, I have always enjoyed those times when the nominees face off in the same room, and as a fan of history, listen for enduring lines. Some of you will recall, for instance, how candidate Ronald Reagan disarmed his opponent’s argument with a genial “There you go again” or how after a Republican vice-presidential candidate compared his age and experience to a former Democratic President, his opponent retorted, “You’re no Jack Kennedy.” As one who does not speak well off the cuff, I watch those events with empathy, but continue to be puzzled as to why the ability of a candidate to respond cogently in the moment or throw in a well-rehearsed zinger is thought to offer an indication of what kind of President he or she would be. Still, I was eager to watch on Tuesday.

We did so for about 15 minutes and then turned it off, not due to sleepiness, but because the name-calling, interruptions, and personal attacks were so disheartening. The next morning, I scanned the web for diverse analysis and saw many refer to it as the worst Presidential debate ever and yet then most went on to suggest who had won the evening. Whoever you believe to have been the victor, I would contend the one who lost that night was the American public.

One journalist said, “Judging the debate by traditional standards gives the evening more credit than it deserves. For most people, this was unwatchable, a grab-the-remote, change-the-channel moment in a forum that in past election years has served the country well. What two more debates like this will accomplish is hard to imagine, other than to heighten tensions in a country already on edge.” (Balz, Dan, “Trump Sets the Tone for the Worst Presidential Debate in Memory,” www.washingtonpost.com, 9/30/20) Given the troubling news on Friday that the President and First Lady have tested positive for COVID-19 it remains to be seen if the other two debates even happen. Still, it is hard for me to imagine that many minds changed that night.

The same could be said of the Biblical scene recalled by today’s Scripture reading. That passage does not tell of a moment five weeks before an election, of course, but four days before a crucifixion. Nor does it offer an occasion when the issue is making a choice for President, but rather a decision that is far more eternal. Yet like the troubling televised event from last week, so does our narrative recall a debate of sorts that clearly spoke to the possibility of changed minds.

The setting is the last week of Jesus’ life, more precisely Monday. He has returned to the Temple Mount and begun to teach and soon is confronted by ones that the gospel writer identifies as the “chief priests and the elders of the people.” A more contemporary analogy in Christian terms might be to view those individuals as the senior pastors and lay leaders; individuals who had much invested in the state of religious life and practice. Prior to our reading, those Jewish officials have challenged Jesus, asking by what and whose authority he is teaching. In response, he poses a question that they discuss quietly and then refuse to answer.

Our account continues that moment as Jesus then says, “What do you think?” and then offers a brief parable. It describes a man with two male offspring who goes to one and says “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” The young man replies, “I will not,” but later changes his mind and does as his father has requested. Acting upon what that first son has told him, the father goes on to the second and makes the same request. This one answers, “I go, sir,” but never follows through. “Which of the two,” Jesus asks his accusers, “did the will of his father?” The leaders accurately reply “The first.” He then names two category of people the Jewish hierarchy considered among the worst of sinners of that era and connects his words to the ministry of John

the Baptist that had ended gruesomely months earlier. “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him,” he says, “but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

That moment marks the first of three consecutive parables that challenge his religious opponents and ultimately lead them to plot Jesus’ demise. We will be pondering the other two stories in subsequent weeks as part of our livestream services, but stop now to focus on this one.

Most scholars believe Jesus’ primary intent was to contrast those who had accepted his message with those who rejected it during his ministry. Heard in that light, the Jewish leaders were the second son who listened, but refused to accept his truth because it was inconsistent with what they believed about God. Those who followed him, though, were like the first son, who may have initially said “no” but then joined the community, both Jews and a few Gentiles. That seems to have been the original message, given how it was spoken days before his crucifixion.

Still, all of his parables can be heard in diverse ways and thus would like to ponder this one for what it has to say about changing one’s mind. In our culture, we often revere persons who remain firm in their convictions and rightly so. For an individual to be a person of her or his word is a highly valued attribute and in an era that can feel at times as if everything is up for grabs, such a trait can seem especially rare. Yet at the same time, and especially judging by the commercials airing in this election season, our world can also speak of one who has changed their mind as waffling or spineless. The parable stakes out a position somewhere in-between.

As the son celebrated in that story is the one who said “no” and then goes to work while the one criticized said “yes,” but did not follow through. Jesus connects that divergent result with the behavior of those Jewish leaders who stood before him by saying “Even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” Thus, he praises those who did both.

Now, at its most basic level, Jesus is speaking of those who accepted his invitation to follow; those who had no faith and those who had been practicing Jews yet recognized this new thing God was doing in Jesus. In addition to that fundamental point, though, I hear his message as speaking to those of us who have become his disciples while naming how there will be times when we need to change our mind, too. Not change our conclusion about him as the unique embodiment of God’s love, but change our minds about how we live out that faith.

In anticipation of this day when we honor 50-year members, I went back to the Session minutes from 1970 to see what was happening then at DPC. It was a transitional year, as a pastor had resigned under fire and the search begun for the next one. Clearly, that event shaped much of the Session’s work as there were meetings that spoke about guest preachers and a second stewardship campaign as the first one was insufficient. In other ways, those pages revealed the unchanging nature of what it means to be a body of faith as they told of baptisms and professions of faith, weddings and worship services, Sunday School and acts of compassion for people in need. Yet along the way, one could also read of the struggle to change minds.

One meeting spoke of the concern that an upcoming Communicant’s Class retreat would include a sleep over. After a debate that was not recorded, the retreat was approved, but not staying the night. Another occasion recalled the recommendation for a new Sunday morning schedule, including the start of a contemporary worship service at 8:30, but it was rejected on the grounds that it seemed unwise to take such a step without an installed pastor. There was the reading of correspondence from the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of Philadelphia in reply to a request by the Session for clarification of the race issue. I was eager to know more. There was notice of a class on the continuing war in Vietnam, and then, there was a recommendation voted down that had been made in response to declining worship attendance. The motion itself was not

recorded, but the explanation behind the vote was noted “It is hoped that the increase of attendance in the months ahead will make this move unnecessary.” And what was the suggestion that our officers voted down? “Closing off rear pews might be disturbing to some of our worshipers.” Some things never change!

In a parable long ago, our Savior makes clear that there are times as his followers when we need to change our mind. Not about our commitment to him, but about the ways we are to be faithful. For if there is no possibility of such an outcome, do we turn to Scripture or come to worship, offer fervent prayers or bring food for the hungry only to confirm what we already believe? If there is no openness to new insights or the overturning of old convictions, if there is no space even to consider that we might yet gain new possibilities as to what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, then why do we have small groups or Bible studies, invite challenging speakers into our walls or give of ourselves to work for change? Are all of those things simply exercises designed to help us hold on fiercely to the ways we have always thought or responded as a body of faith? If so, then friends, we need to hear Jesus’ words anew.

For the fact of the matter is that if some of those who heard Jesus speak firsthand or watched him offer deeds of power had not changed their minds you and I would not be gathered in this park today. If there had not been those individuals in the first century with clearly worked-out understandings of God or a deeply rooted indifference to things spiritual who turned their lives around when face-to-face with God’s son, our lives would be different in ways we cannot imagine. Had there not been women and men who gathered on East Court Street in Doylestown and for decades held onto the enduring truths of Jesus Christ and yet opened themselves and wrestled with new insights and ways of being faithful, this congregation would have never survived or entered its third century of ministry.

Yet because of that legacy of individuals who were willing to change their mind and navigate the challenging path of considering the new thing God was doing, we have assembled and like those now who have gone before open ourselves to what God is stirring in us now.

Did Jesus change the minds of those who heard him speak that parable long ago? We aren’t told, and certainly the conclusion to that week reveal he had not changed the thinking of the ones who controlled his fate. Yet even if the perspective of that audience remained identical to what it had been at the start, it does not mean his efforts were in vain. And instead, that moment of instruction urges us continue to seek faithful and creative ways to follow the will of Jesus’ Father, even and perhaps especially in those occasions when at first, we say “no.”