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“Jesus’ Presence Changes the Heart and the City”

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Illustration

When the railroads were first introduced to the U.S., some folks feared that they'd be the downfall of the nation! Here's an excerpt from a letter to then President Jackson dated January 31, 1829: As you may know, Mr. President, 'railroad' carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of 15 miles per hour by 'engines' which, in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring the livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed. The letter was signed Martin Van Buren, Governor of New York.

Many people don't have the capacity to see the possibilities for good that change can bring to our lives. In today's parable Jesus tells us that when we change our mind and heart, the door opens to new experiences of redemption.

What a wonderful experience! Here we are in the church parking lot and I'm sure this is the first worship experience ever held on this part of our church property. You are definitely now making history. What brought us here? Some may believe that Covid-19 is responsible, but I believe that God is calling us to be visible and to witness that the church is alive; that as followers of Jesus we are called to the epicenter of our city, to proclaim that there is hope in God! We are present here not only to satisfy our desire to worship God and come to come church, but we are willing to be present today to raise our voice, to listen, and to demonstrate our love for this community, and for this city.

As Jesus arrived in the city of Jerusalem, the epicenter of Israel's political and spiritual power, he shared the powerful message of God's love, justice and compassion. As his disciples we are called to model his behavior.

Bible Context

Today's gospel passage teaches us about the tension that Jesus experienced in the capital city of Jerusalem. These tensions are now coming to a boil, mainly with the powers that be...but Jesus' presence, words and actions in the city change its political, spiritual and emotional reality.

Jerusalem would never be the same...Jesus wanted to transform the reality, mainly for those on the margins and those who needed it the most...but change is a hard thing for those who want to keep the religious and economic status quo. When I think about that, I always wonder what would happen in our world without change?

The parable

A man tells his two sons to go work in the vineyard; the first declines but changes his mind and later goes. The second agrees but does not go. "Which of the two did the will of the father?"

Jesus asks, and his opponents answer, "The first" — the one who "changed his mind." A Bible commentary states: *The word for "change of mind" here is metamelomai, literally "to change one's cares," or "to feel remorse," or "to regret."* Jesus uses this word here: *the driving idea is still "change of mind," but the accent is on sorrow, remorse, regret. Accordingly, this parable is not a simple contrast between a good brother and a bad one, both sons fall short of the father's wishes. The two are fundamentally the same: neither acted as they should initially. The only difference between them is a remorseful transformation, that's why the tax collectors and prostitutes who have been so transformed, Jesus declares to the chief priests and elders, "are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" But that does not mean the authorities, too, cannot*

enter! We all fall short, the parable suggests; what matters is the willingness to be open to changing our minds and our lives. Without that willingness, all the social status, rank, or position in the world doesn't matter.

Takeaways:

If we have ears to hear, we can receive this parable as if it's addressed directly to us: what change of mind is God calling us to? What pang of regret may help us chart a new way forward? How is God challenging us to "change our cares," to reset our priorities, to rearrange what most concerns us? Jesus lifts up "tax collectors and prostitutes" as models of mind-changing. He implicitly keeps the door open, even for his opponents — and even for us. Changing our minds and our hearts is a permanent possibility, and a permanent invitation. No matter what path we've taken thus far, no matter how supposedly wayward or pious, God continually beckons us to take part anew in the unfolding divine mission. As we were able to adapt our lives to the new normality because of Covid-19, we are also able to change for good. We are here in the epicenter of Des Moines, to do what, what is our mission? Change! However, all possibilities to transform the reality of our world start within our own hearts, the change starts within us! Within the Church! Within the city of Des Moines. (Describe the change we want to see?)

We are here not because of Covid-19, but because we believe in the God of transformation!

Amen!