

Dilemma

A Dilemma is defined as a choice that must be made between two undesirable (or at least less than ideal) options. The Pharisees are trying to put Jesus in one by demanding that he reveal the source of his authority to do the things he's doing. If he tells them that his authority comes from God they can accuse him of heresy, if he says anything other than God they can just dismiss him as a charlatan. He changes it up on them by asking them about John the Baptist, who by this point was martyred by Herod and had assumed the honored role of prophet in most people's mind. Jesus puts them in a dilemma because they cannot answer the way they want to for fear of the people's opinion of them and they cannot say he was from God because then they will be guilty of not heeding the words of the prophet.

By not answering they take the only escape they have, but it also gives Jesus a valid excuse not to answer their question. But they're not out of the noose just yet, Jesus has a parabolic question for them, he gives them a story that is one step removed from the actual situation and allows them to actually see themselves for what they are, it's an old prophetic trick (remember Nathan telling David that story about a little lamb?). The situation of the parable is a dilemma as well. Two sons, one says no but has a change of heart and obeys, the other says sure, but then does not do what he says. I know the one I would say is better, because like most of us, I'm pretty utilitarian and as long as the work gets done I can forgive a little bit of griping and recalcitrance. But in this culture, both sons are wrong. The first dishonors his father by not doing what he is told and that honor is not healed when he changes his mind and goes back. Conversely the honor that the second son gives to the father with his answer is betrayed by the lack of obedience in action.

The chief priests and the elders actually answer correctly, but their answer is also a self-condemnation. They understand, as most of us do in our gut reaction that the way we act is probably more important than what we say, but they do not get the pointiness of the question. They are the second sons, the ones who say yes, but do not go. The tax collectors and prostitutes, who listened to John the Baptist and repented, are the ones who actually do the will of the Father despite the fact that they don't seem to be anything like righteous, they recognize their blindness and therefore are able to see. The chief priests are so busy trying to defend what they think of as righteousness that they actually view Jesus as their adversary rather than their messiah, and he gets them in precisely the trap that they set for him. When they answer the question the way they do they are condemning their own way of relating to God: saying the right things, holding up the right laws and clever ideas, but not really going into the vineyard to actually help.

This is a deep cautionary moment for those of us in the church. Sure there are "those" people who look disobedient and sinful on the surface, but they have the potential for a "change of heart" and repentance. The ones who repent of their attitudes are better off than those who think they are completely justified in their disobedience. This should tell us a lot about what the church of Jesus Christ should look like and it should guide how we shape our life together. Unfortunately we too often insist on our second son ways, saying the right things, but not actually doing what God has called us to do.

Among the other valuable things that Sacraments do for us as the church, they put us in the proper place, where we can anchor ourselves in "saying" yes to God's invitation and call, but also have a moment where some physical aspect comes into it. You repeat the "yes" of union with Christ in Baptism, particularly when we baptize babies, we realize that it is not our ability at work, but God's grace. When we come to the Lord's Table, we have in full view sacrifice that was made for us and we also are

reminded that it was given to us, not earned. We are challenged by both Sacraments to have a change of heart, to turn away from both our defiance, and our hypocrisy.

When we come to the font and the table, we are challenged to set down our agendas and our sin. We should always remember to stop trying to split things into neat either/or categories and getting ourselves twisted into knots. We encounter a mystery. We are reminded of God's grace to us. We are told that this is not a trick question or a dilemma, it is simply a chance to accept the reality that God has reached for us and welcomes us in.