Spirituality
Sunday Resources
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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A friend recently asked me, "How do you think God looks at what's happening in the world?" Shortly after that, I began to contemplate today's first reading.

Listen as God complains about our grievances: "You say I'm not fair! Who's really unfair in this universe? It seems to me that you like to freeze people in place, deciding that people will forever be what they once were. ... What about allowing for a bit of change?"

This comes from Ezekiel 18. Scholars such as Margaret S. Odell suggest he was refuting the proverb, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." That would make this a teaching about individual responsibility — which is surely one way that we can understand it.

At the same time, if we read Ezekiel in the light of today's other two readings, we might discover a different approach.

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 1, 2023

Ezekiel 18:25-28
Psalm 25
Philippians 2:1-11
Matthew 21:28-32

First, a look at Jesus' parable about two children. In this vignette, a father needed help in his vineyard. When he sent his children, one of them committed the unthinkable offense of openly defying the father — an attitude tantamount to denying that he was father to him or her. (The Greek word translated "sons" does not designate a gender.) The second child responded with great formal respect but did nothing to satisfy the father's need.

Obviously, neither child acted rightly. One defied the father, the other replied politely and then rendered the words meaningless. Then Jesus says that the disrespectful child had a "change of mind."

We use that phrase lightly, but the Greek original, *metamelomai*, suggests a deep emotion, an adjustment of a person's basic priorities. This change of mind implied a refocusing of values, internalizing the father's desires — a course of action that effectively (and affectively?) reversed the original insolent "not-your-child" response.

The people who replied to Jesus' question had to swallow hard before saying which child did the father's will. How could they say that a child who acted disrespectfully was in the right? (Would it have been worse if the child were a girl?)

Interestingly, Matthew's infancy narrative subtly anticipates the gist of this parable. In telling of Jesus' origins, Matthew focused on Joseph. As a righteous and merciful man, he intended to divorce Mary, the unwed mother, in quiet — until an angel caused him to change his mind. As a result, he transgressed the formal law, doing instead what he perceived to be God's will.

This week, our second reading casts an unexpected light on the other readings. When St. Paul calls his community to allow Christ's mind to be active in them, he refers to both attitudes and actions.

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Christ's mindset (attitude) led him to ignore the status often attributed to God — the sort of prestige that would allow him to do whatever he wanted and awe others. Christ Jesus presented himself as the anti-celebrity, the servant son who revealed that God is not like we might like to think. Jesus revealed a God who waits for people to come around to internalizing the divine will — no matter how long it takes or how much they may resist along the way. It appears that God prefers scandal to lip service.

What if the answer to Jesus' question were, "Both children did the father's will — at least in part"? Neither was an ideal child. One made a display of proper respect, but never incarnated that verbal devotion in deed. The other gave the appearance of

being sacrilegious, but carried out the father's will.

What if we took this parable as an invitation to stop dividing people into camps, contrasting Republicans and Democrats, pro-lifers and the ecology-minded, liberals and conservatives, and on and on? Both children failed the father and both respected him. What about a conclusion that says they were to learn from one another and from the attitude of Christ, who was telling the story?

This solution may not satisfy any of us — some want to cling to respect and others demand action. If we resist the idea of learning from the other, we must be hearing these readings correctly — the Scriptures are supposed to challenge us.

In our selection from Ezekiel, God puts our dissatisfaction on trial. Jesus tells a parable exposing the incompleteness of opposing understandings of God's will. Paul then invites us to take on the mind of Christ who lived and died without defending his own interests in any way.

Today's reading calls us to identify honestly with one of the children and then to really listen to the other. This is the kind of dialogue Pope Francis says will create a synodal church. The Gospel is always a call to metanoia, to the change of heart and mind that opens us up to other perspectives — including God’s own!

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