



18th Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2026

By Christy Wetzig, Parish Associate

Matthew 21:28-32

“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ “ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”

In Exodus 17 the Israelites ask, “Is God among us or not?” At the time of this story it’s been less than three months since the terrible plagues in Egypt and the first Passover in which all the firstborn sons in Egypt are killed but not a single one is lost among the Israelites. It’s been less than three months since they walked on dry land through the Red Sea with the Egyptian army inundated behind them. They’ve been fed with manna and quail in a foodless desert and now they find themselves thirsty. In their distress they ask, “Is God among us or not?”

They’ve been promised this great deliverance from slavery and to their horror they’ve discovered that salvation doesn’t look at all like they’ve imagined it. So much for a land flowing with milk and honey—they’ve in fact found hunger and thirst, endlessly making camp and breaking camp, sleeping in tents, the hot sun on their weary heads, their children crying in the dust and heat. The misery is so dire that they feel a sentimental longing for their past life of slavery, and God’s promises seem to have become a curse. In what was supposed to be a place of deliverance they’ve instead found a keen disappointment with God. “Is God even among us or not?”

The place where thirst stops them happens to be Horeb, which is an old haunt of Moses’, the mountain on which he used to herd sheep, where God met him that fateful day in the burning bush, giving Moses a great task and told him, “I will be with you.” Horeb is another name for Sinai, where God most visibly was, in clouds of fire and a

voice like thunder, giving Moses the law. Horeb, the mountain of God, where thirst overcame them.

In the Old Testament, when God says “I am with you” it means that God’s power resides in that person, allowing them to accomplish what they are required to do. It’s maybe not the most comfortable condition, to have God with you; it always implies that you have a great work ahead of you, a difficult road. And it also seems a little dangerous—I mean, this is the God who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah by raining fire from heaven, who caused the earth to open up and swallow Korah for having a bad attitude, who killed some of the first priests for doing it wrong—it seems like an uncomfortable thing, to be within smiting distance of an irascible God.

And here, God says, “Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb.” God is saying, “I will be with you on the rock.” God’s presence is so closely identified with the rock there that God asking Moses to strike the rock is an invitation to strike God’s own self. God hears the frustration of the people, hears their disappointment and fear and doubt and says, “Strike the rock.” And as in the desert quiet the crack of wood on stone fades, the sound of trickling, burbling, rushing water surprises their ears. Out of God’s own self pours water to quench the thirst of the people, God’s presence giving them all the strength they need.

God-with-us, Immanuel, is a name for Jesus in Matthew. We’ve heard another of his parables this morning. Although it feels like just another parable in a list of parables we’ve been assigned by the lectionary this summer, some important action has happened in Matthew since the telling of our last parable. Jesus is no longer teaching in the countryside, along the Sea of Galilee; he has travelled all the way to Jerusalem along with crowds to celebrate the Passover; they have welcomed him into the city as he rode in on the back of a donkey; he bee-lined for the temple, where he knocked over the tables of the vendors (all of them permitted and legally allowed), chasing them out, rearranging the furniture. Now, the Tuesday before Passover, he’s set up shop teaching in the temple and it’s attracted a crowd of eager listeners, occupying the temple for days on end, with their noise and their smell and their dirt (I’m guessing they had to get the septic tank pumped several times)—and the religious leaders are not amused.

They challenge him, this upstart rabbi, this rabble rouser, to verbal fencing matches, trying to catch him on shaky theological ground or, ideally, blasphemy, and Jesus sidesteps them by telling a series of parables, thinly veiled criticism, while the crowd eggs him on.

The one we read today is about the two sons asked by their father to go work in the vineyard. One defies his father, an almost incomprehensible, shameful act in the ancient world, to say no to one’s father, although he changes his mind and obeys later. The other says all the right things but doesn’t actually get around to going.

Like a good teacher, Jesus looks around and engages his audience. “Which one is the obedient son?” he asks. The answer, I think, is neither. The truly obedient son would have immediately answered, “Certainly, I’ll go,” and then got up off his seat and gone to the vineyard. Both sons failed to obey fully, whole-heartedly.

But the religious leaders know what he’s getting at, they with all their intellectual sermons, their fancy dress and their strict observances, aren’t really worshiping God from the heart, aren’t obeying whole-heartedly as God wants. Jesus is drawing attention to their hypocrisy, to the hypocrisy of anyone who says they believe in Jesus but don’t actually follow him. He’s saying that our actions matter, way more than our words, and to the religious leaders who specialized in the right words, this must have stung. Jesus’ onlookers might have cheered on their comeuppance, but let me just remind you what day this was. This was the Tuesday before Passover. Jesus will die on Friday. He will die abandoned by most of his friends who sit around him now, hanging on his every word, all of them will scatter in fear. His most ardent, outspoken believer, who said all the right things, will deny even knowing him.

And Jesus tells this story knowing what’s in all their hearts, all our hearts, that none of us obey with our whole selves.

In the parable Jesus speaks of John’s baptism, and the word John used when he preached and baptized was “Repent!” In Greek, *metanoia*, it means to change one’s mind. (Pardon my pew-rider Greek.) Jesus uses a different word when the brother in his story changes his mind and goes into the vineyard after all: *metamelomai*, which also means to change one’s mind, but literally it means to change one’s *cares*—it implies sorrow, regret, and remorse for a past action.

Metamelomai is a little seed of hope planted in a stark parable, a reminder of what Jesus actually requires of us. Not perfect obedience, not a perpetually undivided heart, but sorrowful regret over our sins and a willingness to change our cares.

And the other seed of hope is that Jesus, God-with-us, gives us everything we need to do the work of turning, of going back to the vineyard. It’s still an uncomfortable presence, even though God has stopped smiting on a regular basis. When Jesus promises that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them” it could read like a threat. I mean, do we really want God to be present with us in our bickering, our self-seeking, our fear and doubt and disappointment?

Yet it’s exactly that presence that we need in order to change. And God-with-us is still that rock marking the place of our thirst and need and so, compelled by our fear and disappointment, our *metamelomai*, our regret and sorrow, we strike the rock. And we will find that what pours forth is everything we need and more. God, that struck rock, resounding in the desert stillness with grace and mercy, is always with us, always loving us and filling us, always beckoning for us to turn, to follow. And the road to the vineyard is always open—it’s never too late to get to work.