

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 10/1/2023, Exodus 17:1-7, Matthew 21:23-32 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

The Israelites witnessed the parting of the Red Sea but then doubted that God was among them because they were hungry. God provided manna and quail. In today's Exodus reading, they were thirsty, which is a real danger in the desert. I'm from Arizona, which shares a border with Mexico that can be deadly when people try to cross it, which they do, routinely; walking across the blistering desert on foot. All too often the Border Patrol finds bodies of those who died from thirst and exposure.

In today's reading, when the Israelites were in the desert without water, God instructed Moses to strike a rock, and promised that God would stand at that rock in front of Moses. Because yes, the Lord *is* among us. Even if we can't see God. Even when terrible things happen. Even when we are suffering. We might not see God, but sometimes we see what God does.

Here at St. David's on this first Sunday in October, we can see what God does through the cookies being baked for incarcerated men whom Rick Mason will visit on our behalf next month. We can see God in the HomeAgain men's shelter where we provide a meal every month.

God is in this work. God *is* among us. How are we going to respond?

Does it matter whether we respond? After all, you and I need God, but does God *need* us?

God may not *need* us, but God loves us and longs to be in a relationship with us, and it matters how we respond.

Do you see yourself in the parable Jesus shared in this morning's Gospel about the two sons—the one who says “no” but then goes into the vineyard, and the one who says “yes” but does not?

My husband likes to call me “Dr. No” because my knee-jerk reaction to almost anything is negative. No. No, I don't want to go to that party or that restaurant. No, I don't want to get my annual mammogram.

Poor Gary. He saved my life once by insisting on a mammogram, and as a result of that screening, my other cancers were eventually detected and addressed. I'm grateful that he continued to nag me after my initial “no.”

“I will not,” the first son said when his father directed him to go work in the vineyard. I wonder why he declined. Maybe he's like me and the word “no” flies out of his mouth practically by instinct. Maybe he had other plans and was annoyed that his father was trying to disrupt them. Maybe he hated grapes and just didn't feel like it.

But later, he changed his mind and went.

What was that about? What do you think his father thought if he caught a glimpse of his son working in the vineyard after his defiant “I will not”?

The second son, on the other hand, sounds obedient. He's the good one, or so it would seem by his response. "I go, sir."

But he didn't go. Now what does that make you think of?

Many of Jesus' parables are tricky to puzzle out, but (to me anyway) this one seems clearer than others. The second son is like the priests and elders who were questioning Jesus' authority, but then when Jesus questioned them back, they worried about what the crowd would think of them if they didn't answer that the baptism of John came from heaven, so they said they didn't know whether it came from heaven or was of human origin. They were like the son who said "I go, sir" but then did not go.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes were like the son who said, "I will not!" but then went and worked in the vineyard anyway. They maybe have been judged by the chief priests and elders as sinners, yet Jesus said those supposed sinners would enter the kingdom of God before the ones who thought of themselves as the good ones. The obedient ones.

Where are we in the story? Are we like the chief priests and the elders, showing up here on Sunday mornings but then not doing the work of God? Maybe we don't go into prisons like Rick. We don't feed people like Joannie and Candy and all of those who prepare dishes for the third Monday of the month. Maybe, like me, manna bags linger in our back seat and we never give them to anyone, not because we don't see hungry people but because we judge them as we wait at a stoplight. "Is that person *really* hungry?" "Isn't it illegal to solicit on traffic medians?"

Maybe we take communion here on Sunday mornings, saying "amen" afterwards, kind of like the second son who says "I go, sir"; but after we leave this building we forget all about those pesky baptismal vows to seek and serve Christ in all persons, so we flip off someone who gets in our way as we're driving, or snap at the cashier at the grocery store, or get impatient with the harried pharmacy tech when we show up for shots.

Or maybe you sleep in on a Sunday, saying "I will not" when it comes to church, and your church-going neighbors and your rector judge you; but then you procure some size-five diapers for Little Hands Virginia because our neighbors with SNAP benefits can't use them for diapers. Or after you skip church on Sunday you pick up trash in a public park even though someone else should be paid to do that, or possibly you accompany a friend to an AA meeting.

Can we be like a third son or even a daughter, who says yes, she will work in the vineyard, and then actually *do* it?

Is God's vineyard inside or outside this church building, or both? What work is God asking you to do today? How are you going to answer—and more importantly, are you going to *do* that work?