

Only their Ears Got to Heaven

September 28, 2008, 26th Sunday, Matthew 21: 23-32

The Pharisees were like TV preachers. Everybody was supposed to listen to them because they were the ones who knew the law. But there was a new preacher in town whose popularity threatened their authority.

So Jesus told them a story about a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard." The boy immediately said, "No." Later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to his other son and said the same thing. This one answered, "Yes." but he never went. Jesus asked a question: "*Which of the two did what his father wanted?*" "*The first,*" they answered. Then Jesus delivered the punch line, "*I tell you the truth tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.*"

There is an old Japanese story about a man who died and went to heaven full of gardens and mansions. But one day the man came to a room lined with shelves. On the shelves were piles and piles of human ears! An angel explained that these ears belonged to all the people on earth who "*listened*" to the word of God every Sunday but never "*acted*" on those words. All their Masses never resulted in action. When these people died, therefore, only their ears got to heaven.

Jesus is dealing with a bunch of "*earless*" religious folk trying to show the Jewish Pharisees as well as today's Christian Pharisees a new view of God. Jesus is talking about what types of people are acceptable to stand before God. Maybe the people you think are sinners today – *please take a minute to add your own list* – maybe these sinners will get into heaven before you do.

Last Wednesday I went to a workshop with 40 different church congregations from all over southern Indiana to talk about what it means to be a "*flourishing congregation*." One of the questions they asked was: "If I fell a sleep for five years and woke up and my church kept on flourishing what would it look like."

I wrote down my description of Nativity as a flourishing Catholic Christian Church in five years: "*Nativity is a church where everybody could get baptized again, so they could start over with a clean slate, all fresh and new, like a newborn baby if you were ready to begin again with both the right words and the right actions. So, no need for annulments, no need for guilt trips. Everybody who wants to change can start all over again.*"

I told a story a few years ago that is perfect for today. An 18-year-old boy, named Harry, had fight with his father. The boy cursed him, called him terrible names and brought up every negative thing the father had every said or done. Then he stormed out of the house, hopped on a train and ran away from home. A few weeks later, without any money or food or support, he called his mother to see if his father would let him come home. His mother was unsure so Harry told her that he would be on the bus to Clay tomorrow and if his father would let him come home he should put a yellow hanky on the old oak tree. The next day as he got close to Clay he recognized the curve right before his house and he was too nervous to look so he asked a guy on the bus to look an see if there was a yellow hanky on the old oak tree. He asked, "Do you see a yellow hanky, do you, do you." The guy said "No." Harry began to cry. Then the guy said, I see 100 yellow hankies on that old oak tree." God is waiting for us to come home.

Another story: Diana was a beautiful baby. People gave her candy, oohed and ahned over her, because she was so cute. But when Diana was fifteen months old, she fell and injured her mouth. Suddenly, her mouth took on a lopsided shape. Overnight, the world seemed to treat Diana differently. Strangers no longer oohed and ahned over her. They stopped giving her candy. Admiring glances changed to awkward stares. Diana had not changed in the least. She was still the same smart, loving, beautiful little girl. But the community no longer embraced and encouraged her because of her outward appearance.

In the Pharisees minds God only loved those who were perfect, without defect. They thought God was like human beings who turn their back on a little girl because of a crooked mouth. The Pharisees had no concept of God's grace God's love for all God's children, even those who were tarnished with sin.

Jesus knew that is not the way to bring hurting people into the kingdom of God. He did it with love and acceptance. He did it by living out God's amazing grace.

We are to be grace-filled. We are to reach out to little girls with crooked smiles, old people with trembling hands, sinners full of bruises and blemishes. We are to value all people as made in the image and likeness of God, beautiful inside and out, worthy of acceptance and love. It is our job to invite and introduce our neighbors to the One who died for them and for us. Let Nativity be a flourishing congregation where everyone can start over again with a clean slate. Let Nativity put up a thousand yellow hankies on the old oak tree.

Nobody is hopeless. Nobody is beyond help. Why? Because there is a man with nails in his hands who says "*You're so important I gave my life for you.*"