

Oh, how those chief priests and elders must have squirmed in their seats when Jesus told them this easy parable. A father has two sons: He says to one “Go,” and the son says no, but eventually goes. He says to the second “Go,” and the son says yes, but never goes. Which one did what the father wanted? They know the answer. Easy. The first. Only to realize then, that Jesus told this parable to point out their own hypocrisy. Jesus meant say that they’re the second son: the one who says, “I will go!” but never does. Jesus hoped to drive home their empty talk: they *claim* to do will the God without *actually* doing it. Sure, these faithful temple leaders desired to bring more people into the fray but you’d never find outside the temple interacting with regular people. The elders loved their ministries of sacrifice and rituals and worship and music but wouldn’t be caught dead in the temple choir. They were life-long believers who wanted children to learn the faith, but they never took time to teach it to them. Boy, how they must have squirmed to hear that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of them. But after all, they’re the hypocrites, the villains, right? The parable is designed to make them uneasy, and deservedly so. Because when we read these stories, I think we tend to see the chief priests and elders as the villains. They’re the ones who thwart Jesus’ mission. Who complain but who never act. Who talk a good talk but never walk the walk. Now when we church-types look for ourselves in today’s gospel, I think we jump to see ourselves as the properly righteous: as the recipients of grace, the ones who believe in Jesus and accept Christ’s authority and live our lives accordingly. So many times as church people we identify with the tax collectors and prostitutes: the sinners in search of God’s grace. We *definitely* would have flocked to John the Baptist and followed Christ and stood up for Jesus he walked the earth. OR would we have? Because when it comes to our words matching our deeds and our actions aligning with our beliefs, I think we’re a lot more like the chief priests and elders: wondering what authority Christ has in our lives; uneasy when questioned over whether our practice *really* matches our faith; squirming, guilty-as-charged all the times when our Father says “Go” and we say “Ok!” and then we don’t move. Because when we consider, honestly, in our hearts, if we are the first son or the second, we church-types are just as likely be the one who says yes and doesn’t go; the ones who believe in Christ and sing God’s praise on Sunday at 10:30am but neglect to bear out those beliefs in action any other time. Even as people of faith, we risk disconnecting our faith in Christ from our actions. I wonder if Martin Luther had this discrepancy in mind when he preached in Weimar in 1522 because he made the relationship between Christian belief and action abundantly clear: “Christ has served me,” he preached, “and made everything to follow to him; therefore, I should also serve my neighbor.” “I must protect and shield my neighbor....I earn a living so that I can help and serve my

neighbor.” Because for Luther how our daily living reflects God’s grace is all about the neighbor. Vocation, as this daily-living is called, isn’t about a job or work or production or your own satisfaction. It is about whether our beliefs in Christ align with our actions towards the neighbor. It’s about whether our salvation by God’s grace translates into service towards the other. The last sentence in our Reformation reading today makes that *so clear*: “When a Christian does not serve the other, God is not present; that is not Christian living.” This parable and Luther’s sermon contain a message about hypocrisy and service that may make us squirm, especially on God’s Work Our Hands Sunday. I don’t know, but I think the ELCA invented God’s Work Our Hands Sunday to help us be less like the churchy-type chief priests and elders and more like the repentant tax collectors and prostitutes. The ELCA gave us this annual Sunday to move us from being the second son to the first; to help our beliefs align with our actions by encouraging us *to serve* to remind us that our vocation--our call from God--is to serve our neighbors. Because God’s Work Our Hands Sunday links how we worship with how we serve. We bring up fresh fruits and fruits and vegetables to connect the weekly offering with feeding the poor and to see how even a simple trip to the grocery store can benefit the oppressed. God’s Work Our Hands Sunday reminds us that serving Christ doesn’t only happen on Sundays in this building: it happens whenever and wherever we serve our neighbors, including at the workplace, at school, at home, through our families, in our professions, even in retirement. It’s a much-needed yearly check-up that turns our inward-facing church outward, causes us to consider our Christian living, and recalls why we’re here as a congregation. God’s Work Our Hands Sunday, This parable, Luther’s sermon: It all may make us squirm, but it’s also Good News: “When a Christian does not serve the other, God is not present: that is not Christian living.” And yet when we serve, God joins us, and our lives become Christian living. AMEN.

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Lutheran Church of Our Saviour

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Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Lectionary texts from Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon series observing the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation

Topic: Vocation

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Excerpt from Martin Luther’s Sermon in the Castle Church in Weimar, October 25, 1522

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32