



October 1, 2023

## 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

*"Which of the two did his father's will?"*

Matthew 21:31



Dear Friends;

A survey was distributed one Sunday by a young pastor. Among the questions asked was, *"Do you think that there should be an evening Bible study?"* the response was a resounding "yes." Over a hundred people said there should be an evening bible study. The elated young man started making plans.

A couple of days later an experienced lay-leader approach the pastor. Gently he suggested that the young man had asked the wrong question. Instead of asking *"Do you think that there should be a Bible study?"* the pastor should have asked, *"Are you willing to attend an evening Bible study?"*

The next Sunday a new survey was issued, it asked, *"Are you willing to attend a Bible study?"* this time the results were markedly different from the first survey. Only ten indicated that they would be willing to attend. Today, Jesus' parable asks us, *"which brother are we?"* Do we only give lip service, or do we end up doing what God asks of us.

Jesus lived in a culture where everything was very public. Families were large and extended and lived in large compounds. Villages were usually small communities of people who were interrelated by blood and marriage. This culture is preoccupied with the appearance of honor.

If you asked the people of this time who was the better son, they would universally respond the second son. Even though he did not go to the vineyard, his reply was honorable and respectful. It's what dad and the community wanted to hear. It did not matter that he never ended up going to the vineyard. The core cultural value is honorable appearance. This is why Jesus does not ask which son behaved honorably. Rather he asks, *"Which of the two did the will of the father?"*

The Temple priests and elders asked Jesus by what authority was he teaching. They did not vet him, or commission him, or give him a teaching license. They challenge his honor. This parable is Jesus' brilliant response. He defends his own honor and counter challenges the honor of these religious leaders. They used the system to serve themselves and exert power over the weak. They are the second son. Jesus' explanation only rubs salt into their wound. They pretend to accept John the Baptizer, but never take his message to heart. They are actors which is the original meaning of the word hypocrite.

There are a lot of actors in the Church presently. Recently, I received a book written by extreme right-wing nuts. It has a preface by the extremist Cardinal Raymond Burke. The book has a melodramatic title, *The Synodal Process is a Pandora's Box*. These same people would have condemned and castigated any theologian, pastor or lay person who questioned the edicts of the popes they adored. But now they have become the very thing they condemned. They are not of one mind and heart with Pope Francis.

Many theologians believe that many bishops and priests are in a soft schism (i.e., they have broken away not formally but, in their hearts, they are apart from the Church). They act as if they are in communion with Pope Francis all the while undermining his leadership. They do not want a pastoral Church of mercy for the poor and disenfranchised. They want a Church of rules where they hold all the power. This is the same type of structure that brought us the pedophilia cover-ups.

Attending Church or holding a place of authority is no measure of faith. It is only our acts of love, and our work for unity that speak of our faith in Christ. As the Synod begins in Rome let us pray for Pope Francis and the success of the Synod.

Peace,

*Fr Ron*

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