

SERMON- Proper 21 (A)
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Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32

Psalms 25:1-8

Philippians 2:1-13

St. Timothy's Herndon
September 27, 2026

Matthew 21:23-32

OPENING:

Before there was AI, and before there was Chat GPT,
there was—this is at least in education world—
There was the “Cliff Notes” version of the text,
and before that there was the “Reader’s Digest” Version (and there still is both).
These are the condensed, abridged, shortened versions of the whole thing.
Cliff Notes were the “Read it right before the quiz for a book you never read”
version.

Our Parable today from the Gospel of Matthew, the *Parable of the Two Sons*, is the
“Cliff Notes” Version, the “Reader’s Digest” Version, of the (much more well-
known) *Parable of the Prodigal Son* from the Gospel of Luke.¹

Both stories feature a Father, two sons, pain and reconciliation.

But, in today’s version, the surrounding detail is absent:
no going off and partying, no eating with the pigs in the trough, no joyful reunion.
Instead, it’s “Just the facts”, as they say.

I would say that Luke’s version, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is infinitely better
known, cherished, memorialized in sermons and in artwork and in books.
You could probably recite the gist of it without being prompted by any sort of
electronic aid.

Matthew’s version, meanwhile, is short and to the point, almost brutally so.

1st Son, then 2nd Son

It’s nowhere near as well-known...

I had to search and search for the artwork on the front cover of this bulletin.

It still packs a punch, but is so dense that it does not stick with you the way that
Luke’s does.

First, the difference in the versions has something, perhaps, to do with the
audience.²

¹ “Pentecost 18 (A): Catch Me If You Can” (9.21.2026) [The Same Old Song Podcast](#)

² Gundry, Robert H. 1994. (2nd Ed.) *Matthew: a Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 419, 423

Matthew's Gospel famously focuses on teaching.

Jesus seems to be always doing that in the 1st Gospel and Matthew models Jesus after Moses, the great Teacher of the Law.

Luke, meanwhile, focuses on our hearts, and he tells stories.

He creates scenes of drama and pathos that you could never really achieve in an AI run-down or the Cliff Notes version.

Let's concentrate this morning on the method of delivery, how Jesus speaks to us through these parables. And through his life.

PRAYING SHAPES BELIEVING:

At our Shrine Mont Retreat last weekend, our presenter, the Reverend Yuri Rodriguez, demonstrated this by reminding us of an important aspect of what it means to be an Episcopalian/ Anglican.

She talked about the principle of *Lex orandi, lex credendi*—a Latin phrase, which means, basically, “the law of prayer determines the law of belief.”

Lex orandi, lex credendi

I was somewhat bemused when no one knew what she was talking about but, again, the phrase means: how we pray (the words, the delivery, the people chosen *to* pray) is what we believe.

NOT the other way around.

So, a group of people did not get in a room and say: “This is what we believe about x, y, z”... “let's pray THAT way.”

Rather, our “beliefs” have been guided by centuries of lived prayer, of communion with God and one another, where we try this out, we try that out.

“That sounds good, that does not sound quite right.”

We revise, we expand, and we contract. THAT, in turn, becomes what we believe.

Lex orandi, lex credendi

Let me give you another example.

Oftentimes newcomers will email me about our Church, about St. Timothy's.

They have not yet visited, but they want to know who we are, what we believe in.

I try to answer them as best I can but...in the end... it's impossible. Ultimately, I just say: ‘Come to church, worship with us, pray with us, and you will know.’

Other churches make it “easier” for newcomers in this regard.

If you visit other churches' websites, for example, you will find whole sections on "Beliefs".... detailed drop-down menus with titles like "What We Believe" and then Scripture and Theology there in black & white. Clear statements of doctrine to delineate what they believe.

We don't have that. Instead: "What we pray is what we believe."

The best we can do is hand them the Prayer Book, or invite them to worship.

At confirmation classes, I always say this about this dynamic and I will say it now: you are here so you might like that method, that organic process of determining what we believe.

Other people don't. They want the Cliff Notes version and God Bless 'em. And we are also like that in some way. We are all like the chief priest and elders in our Gospel passage. We want short cuts, we want the password, the cheat code, the secret handshake. We want the download straight into our selves.

I am partial to our method, of course, and I think that Jesus might be too.

The Elders want to get Jesus into an ARGUMENT about Belief, and he really just keeps asking them questions.

That's what Jesus does to the chief priest and elders and what he will next do to the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, and then to the Roman authorities.

Jesus runs circles around them. He keeps asking questions, telling these enigmatic stories, while, most importantly, showing them through his very life what he believes in. In the end, how could you ever put that into Cliff Notes, how could AI ever describe who Jesus is?³

WORSHIP

The example from Shrine Mont is again helpful.

When she was with us, Mother Yuri not only shared this idea, she embodied it, she lived it for us... in this way: She is a world-class musician, responsible for the creation of the new Latino Hymnal for the Episcopal Church, she is a skilled teacher and practitioner of music, who sings in a salsa band on the side in Nashville. There were parts of me that just wanted to let her sing for us, to sing at us.

To be blessed by watching her gifts.

And I could say the same thing about Todd, or about Julio

³ Charles Campbell, "Homiletical Perspective" in Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2008. *Feasting on the Word*. (Year A, Volume 4). Louisville: Westminster John Knox. 117.

But, in our tradition, We don't just watch someone sing. Think about it, I could have all the "belief" in high-quality music there was. Not sure what it would, ultimately, do for me. Instead, we participate in it. We hand out song sheets, and go over the words, and usher even the most tone-deaf of us into the chorus.

In other churches, that might not be the case. There are professionals on the stage who sing incredible melodies and the congregation... watches.

Now we indeed have a great diversity of gifts in our community with our hierarchies and vestments. I don't play the organ, Thank God; Nancy Miller sings soprano, Bonnie Bunting arranges the flowers, and a whole panoply of LEMS and lectors.

But everyone is on the hook, as we pray together, as we sing together, as we offer our gifts up to God (Stewardship starts next month!) and then most dramatically as we gather around the table for Communion.

But we don't have only the priests take communion.

Everyone gets to take it, everyone is invited. That's what we believe.

CONCLUSION:

The Good News is that, as always, Jesus is one step ahead of us, recognizing our paralyzing desire for the answers, and gently teaching us that it's the journey that is more important.

So, first, Jesus seems to be having a whole lot of fun in our story, as his always is doing. The elders are asking him questions that just don't seem to be that important in Jesus' mind, so it's our job, likewise, to "invite others to join in carnival-like parade of salvation."⁴

Second, and finally, for the more sober-minded among us, Jesus offers a parable of two sons, where the 1st son says "No" and then say "yes."

He could tell a story like that, with authority, because Jesus is the first son, he lived it and experienced it. He fails at Cana, falls asleep at the boat,

Jesus knew about being the 1st son because he would say in the Garden:

"Father if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." . Even Jesus said no, before he said yes. He tried to argue his way... but then he submitted himself to God's authority and lived out his death in a way that we are called to follow and experience ourselves.....⁵

AMEN

⁴ Campbell, 121.

⁵ Susan Pendleton Jones, "The Obedient Son" *Christian Century* (September 8-15, 1999), 849.