Messiah-ing

September 25, 2005 (Proper 21, Year A)

Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32 Psalm 25:1-14 Philippians 2:1-13 Matthew 21:28-32

*Show me your ways, O LORD, **
and teach me your paths.

This year, I have finally begun studying Hebrew. Eight years ago, at the very start of my discernment process for ordination I had promised Bishop Shaw that I would study a biblical language. But, as at many seminaries, Episcopal Divinity School required biblical languages only for students specializing in biblical literature. With my own focus on theology and pastoral care, I avoided Hebrew and Greek, and until this month, I didn't know an aleph from a hole in the ground.

I suppose I was both young men in today's Gospel story: I agreed to do something, then I didn't do it. Now, like the first son, I have finally taken action on my promise. I'm sharing this not because I'm somehow wracked with guilt about my long delay in learning Hebrew. Instead, I'm really excited about something I learned this week in Hebrew class, and it changed how I heard today's gospel.

I learned that Hebrew is a language based on verbs; verbs are at the root of almost every word, and Hebrew sentences are full of verbs. Hebrew – including Aramaic, the dialect of Hebrew which Jesus spoke -- is a language based on verbs, on *doing* and not-doing. *Greek*, the language of Matthew (who's feast day was Wednesday) is more of a language based on nouns, a language based on rigid categories of static existence.

To give an example:
"In the beginning, God created ..." A classic English way of writing. "The beginning" exists independently: a point, a place, an existence in time and space, followed by a point in time of creation, compressed into one moment.

But Hebrew is something more like: *In-beginning-of-God-creating ...* The emphasis in Hebrew is on the creating. Genesis opens with a scene-in-progress, a story of God in the act of creating. Hebrew is a language of *verbs*, of action, of be-ing.

Jesus' parable demonstrates this prioritization of verbs, where faith in action trumps static words: The child who does the parent's will is the child who at the end of the day *does* what is asked for. It is a lesson that Jesus teaches to a group of elders, scholars and priests
in the courtyard of the great Temple in Jerusalem. Men who placed great pride in their nouns – their religious titles, the honor of their parents and grandparents, their vestments, the location where they stood.

And Jesus tells them that tax collectors and prostitutes who turned and followed the way of John the Baptist -- women and men whose position in society was outside the very margins -- those same women and men were succeeding in *doing* God's will. Those women and men, who the clergy had assumed were the last of the least were now stadiia, miles, ahead of the elders. The kingdom of God is wide open to them, and they are entering because of their right actions– irrespective of their nouns: their status, their clothes, their geography, their honor. They are laborers who, although they came to the vineyard in the last hour, have done the work they were called to do, and are receiving what they have been promised.

The same holds true for Christians today. We walk in the Way, along that winding route to God, in our be-ing, in our actions of creation and of stillness. It is the pouring of the living waters of baptism, much more than the water itself, which makes us Christians. It is the recitation of the Creed, much more than the words of the creed, which declares our faith. It is the breaking and sharing of bread, much more than the bread itself, which makes us part of the Body of Christ. It is the fellowship and music and conversation, not the property

which contained it, that made last weekend's neighborhood celebration so wonderful.

Next week, we will celebrate the 60th anniversary of the rededication of our church building. Messiah suffered a terrible fire in 1943, and was rebuilt, in the midst of the war, in 1945. It is a gift and blessing to worship in such a beautiful, well-cared for building. But it was the raising up of this new building, the commitment of time and treasure and talent the on-going building and rebuilding of community, which rededicated this parish. No noun -- charred timbers, poverty, wealth, illness, health, race or gender or number -- can keep us from *doing* what God asks us to do: To love God, and to love *all* our neighbors.

It is what we do – in rest, in silence, in prayer. Let me repeat that sentence again, to be clear that acting in faith is not about *busy-ness*. It is what we do – in rest, in silence, in prayer. In saying "yes," and in saying "no." In repenting of foolish sentences (something I'm sure you will get to see me do many times in the next few years) in action, in cooking, in singing, in giving, in creating community – Messiah-ing, faith-ing be-ing the Body of Christ.

"*for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure."*

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