Sunday, September 26, 1993
WEAK IN THE ELBOWS
Matthew 21:28-32

Historians give this account of the coronation of Charles II as King of England. Back in 1660, the anointing of the King was a full-sized ceremony. The King stripped to the waist and was plentifully anointed on the head, the chest, the shoulders, the back, and the elbows. It was the elbows that caught my attention. The idea of anointing the elbows is a good one. What is the use of an anointed head and heart if the elbows have not been oiled so they can get into action and do a job?

Unfortunately, the anointing of the elbows did not "take" with King Charles II. He was never much on flexing an elbow to get things done. A couplet about him might well serve as an epitaph:

He never said a foolish thing,
And never did a wise one.

The doing was absent. But Charles II was not the only person good at saying things and weak in the elbows. It happens all the time. There are a lot of people who need to have their elbows anointed, along with their feet and hands.

They say the right things, pray with the right words, give voice to the right beliefs, but they have arthritis in the elbows. They cannot, or will not, follow through on what they say they believe or what they say they are going to do.

In one of his parables, Jesus illustrates this point: "A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later repented and went. The father went to the second and said the same, and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 'Which of the two,' asked Jesus, 'did the will of his father?'"

Before we look at what this story says to us, let's examine the background and context. Why did Jesus tell it when he did?

Jesus had been talking and arguing with the Scribes and the Pharisees, the most respected and righteous religious people of that time. They were sure they knew who was in God's Kingdom and who was not. Thus, they had been especially critical of Jesus and his disciples because of their association with sinners and unbelievers — with the outcasts of society. These people did not have the correct theology. They knew little or nothing about the will of God, so how could God accept them? They didn't know the details of the laws of God and therefore couldn't possibly follow all the religious rules.

So, it was that Jesus told this parable in response to the complaints and criticisms of the good church people of his time.

What then does this parable tell us about God and about ourselves?

First, the story reminds us that God is more interested in our actions, in our behavior, in what we do, rather than in our promises, our nice words, or our bragging that we have the right

beliefs. Or to put it another way, God prefers that we be more like the first son than the second. God doesn't care if we say "no" as long as we do the right thing.
Remember, the first son in the story said he would not work in the vineyard but later repented and did so, whereas the second son said what he knew his father wanted to hear. He promised that he would work in the vineyard as requested but then did nothing about it. He had good intentions but no follow-through.

To put it another way, God is not much interested in how many promises we make, how many holy vows we take, whether we use the right words in our prayers, know the most sophisticated theological language, or how pious we pretend to be. To use the language of our time, God doesn't really pay much attention to whether or not we say we have accepted Jesus as our personal savior. God wants to know how we are working out our faith in our everyday living.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was a man of action who invited action on the part of those who wanted to follow him. He was a man of verbs. To his would-be disciples, he said, "Come, follow me." He didn't first teach them theology. They learned their theology as they practiced it in action, as they imitated him. To the rich man who came to him and wanted to know what he must do to find eternal life, Jesus said, "Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and then come and follow me." To the man who was crippled, he said, "Take up your pallet and walk."

In every instance, Jesus asked for a change in behavior. He wasn't much concerned about right beliefs or correct theology. He knew that would follow in due course once the action was taken. I don't know who said it first, but it's something I've always remembered: "It is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting."

I believe there are many anonymous Christians in the world and always have been, people who might have said "no" to God at one time or another but are working in the vineyard anyway. These are the people who quietly go about doing good and are hardly aware of it. In fact, they are surprised when they discover they have been doing God's will all along.

They are the people Jesus described in the parable of the sheep and the goats. One day God will say to them, "Come, you that are blessed by God, and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me, I was naked, and you gave me clothing, I was sick, and you took care of me, I was in prison, and you visited me."

"Then," said Jesus, "the righteous will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And God will say, 'As you did it to one of these least who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

An old saying based on this parable goes, "The way you treat people is the way you treat God."

Secondly, the parable calls on us to look at ourselves. "What do you think," Jesus asks each one of us. Are you more like the second son or the first? Have you said to God and to others, "Yes, I'll do it," but then the promise is forgotten or not taken seriously? Sometimes words come so easily. We know the old saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Think of the many times we have said that we are free of prejudice, that we love and respect all people of all kinds and varieties, that we believe as followers of Christ we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. It's easy to make such statements, but then to follow through in very specific times and places, that's another matter.

Or consider the many solemn promises made in church at the time of infant baptism by the parents, or when we join the church as young people or adults. We then said to God and to others, "I'll work in the vineyard," but frequently, like the second son, we have not gone to work at all, or we have started and not finished.

Think again of those many informal promises we make from time to time. We narrowly escape an accident and we say we are certainly going to change our ways but do not, or do so for a short while and then fall back into our old habits. Or something good happens to us and we resolve that we are going to do some good in response and that too is soon forgotten.

In these and many other ways, the simple story that Jesus told judges us. It judges us when we think of all our high resolves and our good intentions but fail in the follow-through. The qualities that enable a person to start or say that he or she is going to begin are not the same as those which enable one to carry on until the end.

The longest and most difficult step in the process of maturity is from dream to deed, from promise to action, from saying to doing, from belief to behavior. As Eliza Doolittle sings in My Fair Lady, "Words, words, words, I'm so sick of words — if you're in love, show me."

In the third place, with the parable, Jesus reminds us that there are surprises all the time as to whom God considers as having entered God's kingdom and who we may consider as being a part of God's kingdom. Some of the very people we thought were the worst may be there ahead of those we thought to be the most worthy, including ourselves.
That's why I was amused with the news story last week that reported a Southern Baptist poll indicating that 46.1 percent of Alabamans are potentially doomed to hell. The account correlated those saved with those whose beliefs matched Southern Baptist doctrine, which stresses acceptance of Jesus as one's personal savior.

Can you imagine the shocked look on the faces of the very religious people who were listening to Jesus that day when he concluded this parable of the two sons by saying, "Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you."

A fourth comment to be made about this parable is that it is above all one of good news. Can't we all be truly thankful that God does not judge and treat us the way we often judge and treat each other? Isn't it also good news that God loves us even when we say "no" to God? Whether or not we say the right words is not what impresses God. All of us at one time or another rebel and are defiant. We know the experience of saying that we are not going to do something and then later repent and do it anyway. God understands such resistance and loves us.

Like the parent in the parable, God also knows that our defiance at least some of the time is related to our attempt to establish our own identity. It is a part of finding ourselves, of discovering who we are. I remember reading years ago as a new parent the statement, "The first time your child says 'no' to you, she is saying 'yes' to herself."

This search for our own identity begins at a very early age. It begins physically when we are separated from our mother at birth and become a separate entity in the world, and it continues through life. We search for ways in which we are distinct from others, and we also look for the ways in which we are connected to one another. We're all familiar with the child who says, "I won't," when you tell her to brush her teeth, and then she proceeds to brush her teeth secretly. With her "no," the child is saying, "Dad, that's your idea. When I brush my teeth, it's going to be my idea," even though that idea and action agree with that of her parent. In this gesture of defiance, the child affirms both the parent's idea and her own identity.

Above all else, this is a parable about integrity. And integrity is about being strong in the elbows rather than weak. The first son, when asked by his dad to work in the vineyard, said, "I will not." "But," said Jesus, "afterward he changed his mind." I like the translation better which says, "afterward he repented." "Repent" is a stronger word than the phrase, "changed his mind."

I've read this parable over and over again in the Bible, and it wasn't until reading and studying it again this past week that these three words jumped out at me: "Afterward he repented." They are the most important words in the parable. This son had enough courage to admit to himself that he had made a mistake. He reexamined his decision and then he acted.

On the other hand, it takes no courage to deceive someone, which is what the second son did, and he deceived himself as well. The opposite of courage is cowardice.

Repentance is never easy. It takes courage to own up to the truth about oneself, but that's what people of integrity are able to do — repent, change the direction of their living for the better. That's what the super-religious people of Jesus' time had trouble doing. They were secure in their self-righteousness. That's why Jesus said to them, "The tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you."

I have always thought there should've been a third son in this parable, one who when asked said "yes" to his father and then did what he said he was going to do. Fortunately, there are a lot of people among us who have this kind of integrity.

Today, I hope you will reexamine your life. Are you weak in the elbows? Have you said "yes" to following Jesus, but then done nothing about it? Do your actions fit your words? Is there something to which you have said "no," but now you need to repent and go do it? Remember above all, God is interested in what you do with your life, not in what you say you are going to do. Amen.