

While taking a routine vandalism report at an elementary school, a police officer was interrupted by a little girl about 6 years old. Looking up and down at his uniform, she asked, "Are you a policeman?" "Yes," he replied and continued writing his report. "My mother said if I ever need help, I should ask the police," she went on, "is that right?" "Yes, that's right," he told her. "Well, then," she said as she extended her foot toward him, "Would you please tie my shoe?"

It was the end of the day when a police officer parked his police cruiser in front of the station. As he gathered his equipment, his K-9 partner, JAKE, was barking, and he saw a little boy staring up at the officer. "Is that a dog back there?" he asked. "It sure is," the officer replied. Puzzled, the boy looked at the officer and then towards the back of the car. Finally he said, "What did that dog do?"

A mother worked for Meals on Wheels, and used to take her 4-year-old daughter on her afternoon rounds. The little girl was unfailingly intrigued by the various appliances of old age, particularly the canes, walkers and wheelchairs. One day the mother noticed her staring at a pair of false teeth soaking in a glass. As the mother braced herself for the inevitable barrage of questions, the little girl turned and whispered, "The tooth fairy will never believe this!"

OK, another fascinating little parable. Once again, a little bit of background helps us to understand the dialogue. Just a few verses prior to this, Jesus is asked by the chief priests and elders "On what authority are you doing these things? It is generally authorities who have questions about authority, especially when it has to do with church, the symbol of their own authority. The temple authorities are more concerned about who authorized Jesus than they are about the 'things He is doing.' Earlier in Matthew's gospel we read a story of Jesus healing a man's withered hand on the Sabbath (see Mt 12:9-14). The religious leadership who witnessed it asked, "Who gave you the right to do this on the Sabbath?" They could have said, "Nice job on the arm, Jesus." But they never really saw the arm. They only saw what they were conditioned to see. If all you have is a hammer, everything is a nail.

But the question about authority is a trap. If Jesus says He does these things on His own authority, He appears to be a maverick, without any legitimation from His faith tradition. If He says He does them on God's authority, He has infringed on their turf, for they are the guardians of the law and the official interpreters of what comes authentically from God. Jesus' strategy is to turn the tables with a question of His own. If they can construct a trap, so can He.

Jesus avoids the horns of their dilemma by putting them on the horns of HIS dilemma. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" If they say John's authority was from heaven, they have to explain why they did not put their faith in it. And if they say John's authority was of human origin, the crowds will turn against them because they believed John was sent by God. In either case, they do not look good, and looking good is essential. Remember, this is a shame-honor based culture, where to be shamed is the worst thing that can happen. This is where we enter the story today.

Jesus uses the classic ploy of the prophet. He tells a story and then asks His listeners to make a judgment on the characters of the story. They are usually quick to respond for they are people with firm opinions and unyielding judgments. What they do not know is that by judging the people in the story they are judging themselves. They are more involved than they think.

The first son CHANGED HIS MIND. And the authorities recognize that HE was the one who actually DID his father's will. It is this ability to change one's mind that Jesus wants to emphasize. Both John the Baptist and Jesus stressed that METANOIA – a change of mind – is needed to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus concludes the story with the warning to the authorities: "Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. When John came, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you did NOT CHANGE YOUR MINDS and believe him." (adapted from ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN, John Shea, p. 286-288)

OK, so what? The problem is the closed or narrow minds of the chief priests and elders. This is a perennial problem for all of us who think we are religious. We all tend to think we have it all figured out. A master once told of a woman who asked her dentist for the third time to grind down her dentures because they did not fit. "If I do as you say, I fear the teeth won't fit your mouth," said the dentist. "Who said anything about my mouth?" exclaimed the irritated woman. "The teeth don't fit in the glass." And the Master concluded, "Our beliefs may suit our minds, but do they fit the facts?" (AWAKENING: CONVERSATIONS WITH THE MASTER, Anthony de Mello, p. 347)

Today we pretty much shy away from even exposing ourselves to different viewpoints for fear that our deepest beliefs might be questioned in some way. Author David Dark observes that the sound-bite culture we live in today is a sign of our resistance to deal in depth with complex issues and our unwillingness "to listen to (or read) any account of people, places, or events that doesn't somehow prove we're in the right." The result is that the only information we allow into our lives forms a kind of feedback loop, where the same perspective keeps getting played over and over in our heads without ever being modified. (THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO AMERICA, David Dark, p. 29)

This is true in our politics but also true in our theology. As someone who has studied theology formally now for over 50 years, I always find it amazing that people who have no theological background challenge what I say from the pulpit, with such comments as "I learned in 8th grade," or "I read an article on the internet," or "a friend of mine who is a priest says that's heretical." What often passes for Orthodoxy is in fact somewhat Orthodox. It just isn't FULLY orthodox. It's not the full picture. It's often a very self-serving and narrow view of Catholicism. The Catholic faith is a much larger umbrella than many people seem to understand. And if all we know is a very small picture – because we don't want anyone to challenge our little Catholic world view – then our minds are closed to anything that might expand our notion of God, the Church, or the inclusive nature of God's embrace. I've had people say "But the Council of Trent said...." Yes, it DID say that. But there has been 400 years of further theological reflection and development. And a lot of what Trent said was radically expanded –even changed -- by Vatican II. So our fall back position is often rules, understandings which exclude others, and a Baltimore catechism view of the Catholic Church. The problem with all of these is that they neglect that the Church's reflection – and teaching – continues to unfold, forever trying to grasp a bigger understanding of the mystery of God, who says to us in Isaiah: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:6-9)

Third and finally, the remedy, which is right there in the text. It's conversion, change of heart. I read this week "Every gospel story comes down to the same message: We have to change." Kierkegaard insightfully wrote: "It is so much easier to become a Christian when you aren't one than to become one when you assume you already are." The other piece to this is that we often have confused education with transformation. They are not the same. We can KNOW the catechism by heart. But if we don't LIVE IT OUT IN LOVE, then as St. Paul wrote "I gain nothing." (1 Cor 13)

One of the great challenges in religion is just falling into lazy habits. We simply drift into acceptance of life in spiritual maintenance mode. The thinking goes something like this: "I'm not involved in any major scandalous sin. I haven't done anything to jeopardize getting into heaven. I go to church on Sundays, I contribute \$5, I must be doing okay." And we forget that Jesus never said, "I have come that you might do okay." Okay is NOT okay in our discipleship! We have a kind of spiritual attention deficit disorder that God will have to break through. When we are on spiritual autopilot, rivers of living water do not flow through us with energy and joy. Our confessions are more about rules and laws, neglecting the big issues of love, reconciliation, justice and care for the poor.

Mediocrity is more dangerous than serious sin because it can be so subtle, so gradual. Mostly it involves a failure to see. Where is the LOVE? Where is the relationship with God? With our fellow human beings, especially those who struggle in any way?

We are DRAWN to children and saints and poets because they notice things that the rest of us have forgotten -- or failed to see. "I hold this against you," Jesus said to the Church at Ephesus, "You have forsaken your first love." (GOD IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK, John Ortberg, p. 34) Our first love is supposed to be God!

The issue was well-framed by theologian Godfrey Diekmann, who wrote "What if the bread and wine change -- and the people do not?" The test whether or not something is a change of heart/mind -- is whether there are consequences of transformation in our life. Genuine conversion shapes time and space. So if I listen to a Beethoven symphony and leave the concert hall humming, I've had an esthetic experience. But if I leave the concert hall and put all my energies from that point on becoming a violinist, it was a conversion experience. Likewise, if we're in church and we hear a sermon on Lazarus and are deeply moved and say to the pastor, "That was a powerful sermon," and go back and nothing happens, then it was just an esthetic experience. But if we leave church, begin tithing -- and devote our life to bandaging up the wounds of our world, then we have had a genuine conversion experience. (help from Luke Johnson, in HOMILETICS, Jan-Feb 2000, p. 24)

We believe the bread and wine WILL change -- so what about us? Amen.