

Year A - 17th After Pentecost – 01 October 2017  
Matthew 21:23-32

When I first read the parable about the two sons I began thinking about the word 'hope'. Where is the hope in this story? Where is God's hope? That's a tricky question because it looks like the father would have placed hope in the first son who said he would go into the vineyard but his hope would have been unfounded. Had he placed his hope in his second son, the one who first refused to go to the vineyard, then his hope would have been well founded. But that doesn't hold out much hope for us to learn something from this story. Who should we place our hope in? What should we spend our time and energy betting on, if the obvious isn't the real hope? . . . It makes me think about perspective again. Maybe we should take a look at our hope from a new perspective and see what we can see.

When I was in grade seven we read a book that I think should be on every curriculum, if it isn't still. The Outsiders is an amazing book, written by S.E. Hinton. It's about a group of teenage boys who are growing up on the wrong side of the tracks. To the rest of the world they're known as 'greasers' because they slick their long hair back. They wear leather coats and torn jeans and it's assumed that they're always carrying switchblades. These are not the kind of guys you want your daughters to bring home on a Friday night.

Two of the characters, Johnny and Ponyboy, are smart and creative young men but no one knows this because of where they come from and who they hang around with. Johnny, a bit older than Ponyboy but younger in many ways, is a dreamer. He loves to read and his favourite book is Gone With the Wind. He has a tender and compassionate heart but has to try to hide it because he would be beaten up again by the kids from the 'right' side of the tracks.

Ponyboy is the youngest of three. His oldest brother, Darry, gave up a football scholarship to college to take care of his brothers Ponyboy and Sodapop when his parents were killed in a car accident. He comes off as a mean and ornery man old before his time who works two jobs but he just worries that his brothers will end up having to live forever in their crummy neighbourhood when they have the potential to do something better.

As the story unfolds you begin to see that not everything is black and white. The greasers aren't all bad guys and the rich kids aren't all good guys. By the time the story ends, Ponyboy has come to understand that it doesn't matter whether you have a car and lots of clothes or even two parents who work hard to give you everything you could ever want. What matters the most is what you do with what you've got. What matters most is hope.

By the end of the story, Ponyboy has learned these tremendous life lessons, has a greater understanding of the sacrifices his oldest brother makes for him and begins to truly know what it is to take the greater perspective. In the story, it took Johnny's death while trying to save a child from a burning building, for Ponyboy to come to grips with what a life lived well is really about. It's not about what others think, or even what others expect. It's not about money or possessions or whether you come from a good family. It's about knowing which side of the tracks you're really from and then doing something about it.

Like any good story there are many things we can learn from the 'outsiders'. They are a group of young men who look scary and like it that way. It's their defence mechanism. If

*they scare you away then they can't be threatened by you.* They have to eat and sleep and work and go to school, just like the rest of the world. They like to read and dream about what the future might be like, and they like to hope. But growing up on the wrong side of the tracks, they hope in a different way than the rest of us. They hope big. They dream big. They imagine in such grandiose ways that we would never dare imagine because it wouldn't be 'realistic'.

Dreams are for dreaming. God gave us all imaginations so that we could use them, but those of us who are from the 'right' side of the tracks sometimes seem to dismiss the idea of big dreams because we know better. We can figure out the possibility of big dreams becoming realities and we are daunted by the odds. We end up thinking about the limitations and the odds against us so much that we eventually forget what the big dreams were in the first place. In a way, we're like the chief priests and the elders. We're too educated. We know better.

In today's gospel Jesus rebukes the elders once again. They just don't seem to get the point. Now these are the folks who are from the right side of the tracks. They have been well educated. They were brought up knowing all the appropriate customs and etiquette. And most importantly, they follow the rules.

The rules were meant to be followed because following them would gain you entrance into the kingdom of God. Right? Well, we know better now, but then they thought that following each of the 613 Jewish laws would ensure that they were seen by God as righteous individuals. Everything they did and didn't do was to make sure that they would be okay in the eternal long run. They were used to following the letter of the law. But what happens when you stick to the letter of the law? Chances are that you're going to get so focussed on the little points of the law that you forget why you're following it in the first place. All of these folks who were very carefully doing everything quite appropriately were like the son who said he would go into the vineyard and then didn't end up going for some reason.

These 'insiders' who knew the law and lived by it very carefully had forgotten why it was that they were working within the law in the first place. The whole point was not simply to not break the rules. The point was to have the amazing, tremendous and miraculous gift of eternal life with God. They'd left the big dream behind in their pursuit of making sure they measured up on the 'right' side of the tracks.

The outsiders, on the other hand, didn't know what it was like to be sticklers about rules. After all, the folks from the right side of the tracks wouldn't even look at them, let alone tell them why they should follow all these rules. The outsiders, like Ponyboy and Johnny, were people who had to eat and sleep, had the ability to learn and dream, but hadn't been given the opportunity to access the privileges available to the insiders. When the tax collectors and prostitutes got up in the morning they had to feed their children and put clothes on their backs. And when they lay down at night they would have been dreaming about what it would be like to not have to work so hard or in such notorious ways. They had a hard life, but in a way, they had a much better life. When they dreamed about a better lifestyle, they weren't hampered by 613 laws. They could dream of being happy and loving themselves for who they were without fearing that God would despise them for breaking a law. Their dreams were not fettered by the word 'realistic'. Their dreams were just dreams.

And then one day this man named Jesus came to them and said “I can make your dreams come true. I can give you the gift of happiness and loving yourself for who you are and I won’t ask anything of you except that you love me.”

The outsiders didn’t know that there were rules that could stop them from listening to this man and saying yes to his promises. They didn’t know that they should be ‘realistic’ in their expectations of life. All they knew is that Jesus offered them a new way of life, a new way of living and loving and being loved in return, and they said yes. They weren’t hampered by societal conditions. They just saw something better than what they were experiencing already and said ‘yes, I’ll go now into the vineyard’, and they went.

When Jesus made the same offer to the elders he didn’t get a resounding ‘sure, we’ll take you up on your promises’, he got an argument about whether or not it would be prudent in the long run to follow this man. Jesus was offering them, on the spot, what they had been working so hard at by following all their laws. They were so busy being good at being from the right side of the tracks that they had forgotten what they had been dreaming about in the first place.

When we live our lives as Christians we need to shift our perspective. Sure, we live on the ‘right’ side of the tracks. We come to church, we say our prayers, we do all the right things. But in the long run are we missing the point? Are we following all the rules but forgetting to follow our hearts?

Jesus has given us permission to dream big, to use our imaginations and picture a world in which he is the center and the reason. Maybe we need to switch sides and check out the view from the wrong side of the tracks. Maybe we need to leave our ideas about what the Christian life *should* look like over here and join Ponyboy in imagining what life could look like from over there.

We should dream big. We *should* let our imaginations get away from us. After all, almost every week we give glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. If God *is* giving us permission to imagine a better life for all his people, then who are we to turn him down?