

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In today's gospel, Jesus told a story about two children. A parent asked the first to go work, and the child said no. But later, that child reconsidered and went. The second child said, "I'll go work," and then did nothing. Jesus asked which one did what the father wanted, and it was the one who acted as the father asked. What strikes me, though, is that the child Jesus called faithful was the one who was willing to change. Not because change is automatically good, and not because convictions do not matter, but because the first answer did not have to determine what happened next.

Jesus made the point even sharper when he explains the parable. The religious leaders had challenged his authority, so Jesus asked them about John the Baptist. They had seen people respond to John. They had seen lives change. And yet, Jesus said, even after seeing all of that, they would not change their minds and believe him. Their problem was not simply that they had once gotten something wrong. It was that what they witnessed could no longer move them.

And that can happen to us, too. Once we have spent time defending a decision, changing our mind can start to feel less like learning and more like losing. Because eventually the question expands from, "Was I wrong?" to "What does being wrong say about me?" I know that in myself. Once I have spent enough time carefully discerning something, I can become attached to

the idea that the discernment is finished. Sometimes “I’ve thought this through carefully” becomes a more respectable way of saying, “Please do not make me reopen this conversation.” You see, sometimes being right becomes so important that we would rather defend yesterday’s answer than notice what God may be revealing today.

That was on my mind this week as I gathered with a preaching group I’ve been part of for several years through Calvin Seminary. Each year, the seminary gives us a topic to explore in relationship to preaching, and this year the topic is artificial intelligence or AI. It was an especially interesting week to have that conversation. Just days ago, Australia disclosed that an OpenAI agent, while trying to gather health statistics, had gone beyond the access it was given and entered a government Medicare data portal without authorization.

Other companies have recently reported AI agents crossing similar boundaries during testing, including a Google system that accessed three real companies. At the same time, the public conversation has grown increasingly anxious about what more powerful AI could mean for human society—even about potentially catastrophic consequences. Stories like those can make it sound as though the future is simply arriving at us faster than anyone can control it.

But that may be part of the danger. Once we start treating a future as inevitable, it becomes easier to stop asking whether that future is good. So our conversation was not simply, “Is AI good?” or “Is AI bad?” We were asking what might genuinely help people, what needs limits, and what responsibility we bear for the future we are helping create. The fact that

people are already using something does not mean we surrender responsibility for what comes next. We still make choices about what gets built, what boundaries are set, who benefits, who bears the cost, and whether these tools serve people and planet. In its own way, AI brought us back to the same question Jesus' parable raises: when what we see gives us reason to reconsider, are we still capable of being moved?

And it is much easier to ask those questions about technology than about ourselves. Something is happening here at Wicker Park Lutheran. More people are worshiping with us. New members are joining. That is a gift. And gifts sometimes ask something new of us. Ministries that served this congregation faithfully in one season may need to grow in another. What served us well five years ago may not be what serves us faithfully now. So, we discern. We listen. We gather information. We pray. We plan. And still, none of that can guarantee that we will always make the right decision. For, if faithfulness depends upon our ability to control the future and get every answer right, then none of us is free.

A few minutes ago, Catalina was baptized. Before Catalina could offer God a faithful answer, God gave Catalina a promise. She did not have to know who she will become. She did not have to understand God correctly or demonstrate that she will always make the faithful choice. Rather, God acted first. Through ordinary water joined to God's Word, Catalina was named, claimed, and joined to Christ.

Catalina's baptism does not guarantee that she will always know the right thing to do. It gives her somewhere to belong when she doesn't. Her belonging, and our belonging, rests on God's promise. That is the freedom

of grace, for we can discover that we were wrong without discovering that we are worthless. We can repent without losing ourselves. We can begin again because our identity was never secured by our ability to get everything right in the first place.

And God does not simply give us that promise and then leave us alone to figure out what faithfulness looks like. In Philippians, Paul points us toward Christ, whose way of exercising power is not about grasping, domination, or protecting status at someone else's expense, but about humility, solidarity, and concern for the neighbor. And then Paul says, "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work." Notice how closely that fits Jesus' parable: the willing and the working, the intention and the life that actually follows. And Paul's promise is that even there, God is already at work.

And the thing that I love most is that "you" is plural. If Paul had been from the American South, maybe we would hear it more clearly as "God is at work in y'all." Catalina was not baptized into a private spiritual project and sent off to figure out Christianity by herself. Her dads made promises. Her sponsors made promises. This congregation made promises. She was baptized into the body of Christ.

That is why one of our congregation's goals next year is to make room simply to listen to one another. Not because we have forgotten who we are, and not because every conviction is up for grabs. But this congregation is growing and changing, and if God really is at work among us, then no one of us gets to assume that we alone can see the whole picture. Listening together is not

a sign that we have no direction. It is one way we make room to notice where God may be leading us next.

Jesus asked which child did the father's will, and surprisingly, it was the one willing to change. That does not mean every new thing is faithful, or that every old thing needs to be discarded. It means that faithfulness sometimes requires us to remain open enough to be moved. We will not always know immediately what faithfulness requires. But we have been given something: God's promise. And we have been given one another. So we can listen without panic, learn without shame, reconsider without losing ourselves, and when the way of Christ calls us somewhere new, follow. For God is already at work among us. Thanks be to God. Amen.