

- Sometimes, when I'm working with a passage,
- I like to clarify what I know and what I don't know about what's going on.
- Okay, here goes:
- We don't know if this behavior was typical of the sons or extraordinary.
- We don't know what interaction or conversation the sons may have had with each other (or with their father) after their initial response.
- We don't know what may have prevented either of the sons to act conversely to their earlier statements.
- And we don't even know exactly why Jesus told this parable or Matthew shared it.
- So what do we know?
- Well, mainly that the son who said he'd show up and work did not and the son who at first refused changed his mind and did.
- We also know that most of those listening would probably agree that "actions speak louder than words"
- and therefore believe that the first son, despite his abrupt refusal of his father's command, is the one who "did the will of his father."
- I find this to be a valuable exercise because a lot of what we don't know has to do with motivation and circumstances...
- I don't always know what motivates people to come or– to not come to church.
- I don't always know what collection of experiences shapes the religious and political beliefs of the congregation.
- But it is important to know who and what makes up the St. Mark community.
- It got me thinking how important this parable is when reflecting on how actions do speak louder than words... and how we are a church of more words than actions lately,
- But, doesn't stop there, helps us to also offer a word of surprise and hope.

- So for instance.... no matter what may have happened in the past, God is eager to meet us in the present and offer us opportunity to be something more, something different, something new.
- Right now we are still using our energy up on “grieving what we are not anymore”, and working hard to try and get that back....
- The hope I want to grasp to here is that....
- God is here, inviting each of us into something that not only lives out in front of us but has the capacity to shape us, even in, especially in times of change and transformation.
- Each moment is pregnant with the possibility of receiving God’s grace, repenting of things we’ve done or were done to us, and receiving the future as open rather than already decided.
- I want to ask you a question that I have been asking myself during and post pandemic...
- What things are we holding onto that make it difficult to wonder or to imagine that the future can be different than the past?
- Right now, Church leaders can look around most sanctuaries on a Sunday morning,
- And we find... there are people who voted for our current president and those who did not,
- People who believe children should belong in worship, and people who don’t,
- people who are optimistic about the future, and those who are frightened,
- people who feel great about their church homes, and those who don’t,
- and so on.
- We don’t know their motivations or experiences, but we do know that God is reaching out to each and every person with acceptance and love and forgiveness, calling us to be the church TOGETHER!
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- PAUSE
- We live in a time of such division.
- And I am worried that too much division or acts of isolation are standing in the way of this church succeeding in moving forward.
- As I see it, we are trying to be a little bit of everything to everyone, and because of that, we are not capable of making our words turn into action.
- And so we remain just words.
- Words of “we should we should we should” fill this place...
- And not “ I will I will I will.”
- People say, personal ask is best...
- Well, we do that,
- And people agree to sign up... but when the action is needed, words fall short.
- Not to call out Sunday school... but it is a reflection of a pattern we have been stuck in for some time now...
- And because of that... we don't have Sunday school today.
- We need to be truthful and take some real time to learn who we are now, here, 2023...
- Not try and see how we can make what we have now fit the model of our past... square peg, round hole...
- Debie Thomas, one of my favorite authors, writes, “What Jesus opposed through the story of the father and the two sons was all forms of religion that stop at empty words. All forms of piety that don't move us into the world of concrete action on behalf of justice, mercy, equality, love, and compassion. All forms of Christianity that flicker to life on Sunday morning, but then fade out between Monday and Saturday.”
- “We are invited to be like the first son. We are invited to be like the tax collectors and the prostitutes.

- But we cannot do this,” Thomas continues, “if we keep our faith lives tethered to abstractions. If we live a Christianity of the mind without also living one of the flesh. After all, it is with our bodies that we experience pain, anger, terror, and joy. It’s my chest that hurts when I mourn. It’s my face that burns when I’m angry. It’s my whole body that warms with pleasure when I’m happy. Our faith is meant to be embodied. To be incarnate. To be organic. To be active. In the realm of God, words – even the most beautiful words – are not enough.”
- I get it, we are fearful of the unknown... and it can be easier to complain about it, but it doesn't get us anywhere.
- Please hear my message today through a lens of truth and grace....
- Lets not use all our time dwelling on the differences of how we once were, because if we do, we will remain stuck, and we will not flourish.
- But instead, trust the Spirit, and how wildly she works.
- Let's not let the fear of this “unknown church reformation” drive our bus,
- Let us worship, and ponder how God is calling each of YOU, each of us, beyond our words... and into action.