

The story of the two sons is a familiar story. We hear it every year on a weekday during Advent and, of course, every three years on the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

A father sends each of his two sons to work in his vineyard. The first says no, but later changes his mind and goes. The second agrees to go, but never follows through.

Jesus, in telling this story to the chief priests and elders, is trying to break through their hardheartedness. When he asks them, “who did the father's will”, they convict themselves by the answer they give. As Jesus responds, he tells these religious leaders of Jerusalem, who preach but do not practice, that they are like the second son who said yes to the father but did not do his father's will. Society's outcasts, the prostitutes and tax collectors, who were following John's call to repentance, were like the first son who rejected the father's call at first but later had a change of heart. They have received God's mercy and become the true heirs of the Kingdom of God. To make matters worse, the chief priests and elders observed the conversion of those sinners but did not change their own hearts and accept John's call to repent.

The obstinance of the religious leaders was persistent. Throughout Jesus' ministry, he frequently confronted them with their refusal to embrace God's mercy and repent of their own sinfulness, but they refused. We know how this turns out. They become so intimidated by Jesus' teaching they conspire to kill him.

But now we have to ask a difficult question. Which son are we like? Do we say yes to God but never follow through on our commitment? Or have we said no to God and then repented and returned to him. This is something that is really important to seriously think about. Which son are you like?

We see examples of the first son's repentance in many heroes of

the faith. Consider these: Moses was a murderer, David was an adulterer, Jeremiah was a complainer, Francis of Assisi was debauched, Ignatius of Loyola was a vain soldier of fortune, and Augustine a womanizer. But despite their flaws, all these saints had one thing in common. Like the first son in this parable, they initially said no to God's call, but later had a change of heart that radically altered their lives. Because their “no” became a “yes”, they have left us a legacy of holiness to which we can all aspire.

Fr. John Riccardo, in his recent video series, suggests an often overlooked way of understanding God's call to us. Initially his call is not to go and do something, but a call to come. It is not a generic “y'all come” — it is a very personal call to each one of us. He calls each of us by name. God loves each one of us as individuals. He desires our companionship, one on one. The psalmist affirms this in Psalm 149 when he says: *“The LORD takes delight in his people”*.

Think about that for a moment. That's an awesome thought, God, creator of the universe, desires our companionship. — He delights in being with each of us individually. —

God calls each one of us into friendship with him before he calls us into action. We often overlook this important point when we think about God's call to us. Yes, he does call us to work in his vineyard, but first and foremost he calls us into relationship.

This is what the prostitutes and tax collectors recognized and the chief priests and elders did not. Having lived a life of “no” these sinners said “yes” to Jesus' call to a personal relationship with him and became his disciples. The religious leaders who said “yes” to following the law, rejected Jesus' call to relationship.

Our faith heroes, St. Augustine, St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis and the others, all did the same thing, they turned from a life of

saying “no” to God, to embracing the relationship that God so desperately desired to have with them.

Now I'll ask that difficult question I posed a moment ago in different way. Are we like the chief priest and elders, and just going through the motions of being Catholic? Does our “yes” to God's call end at Sunday Mass? Or are we taking the time and making the effort to enter into that special relationship with God, that friendship in which he delights, just spending time in his company?

If we recognize that we are falling short, how do we respond to God's call to friendship? The answer is simple yet difficult. It can be characterized by the word “surrender”. It means that we have to let go of those things that keep us from that relationship, whatever they are. Attachment to possessions, wealth, influence, popularity, power, all those worldly things that consume our focus in life, need to become secondary to our relationship with God.

As with all relationships, spending time with the other, making an effort, is essential to building a meaningful relationship. It's no different with God. In our modern society time is a very precious commodity, giving any of it up is truly difficult. But entering into relationship with God is a personal choice we all have to make. It doesn't happen automatically at our baptism. It doesn't happen just because we come to Sunday Mass. It only happens if we make that intentional choice to surrender ourselves to God's call to be our best friend and to revel in the love he offers to us.

We have much to gain when we embrace a relationship with God. Simply put we will enter into the fullness of life. There we will find, among other things, gifts like happiness, peace, joy and hope. There will also be challenges, for God, like any good parent, will always encourage us to grow.

How do we respond to God's call, how do we draw closer to him to

enter into that relationship? Not surprisingly it is through prayer. Now there is a big difference between saying prayers and praying. Prayers like the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Rosary, the Liturgy of the Hours, the Holy Mass and the like are all very good and very important. It is immensely valuable to say these prayers. But praying is very different from saying prayers. In praying we are seeking those moments of real personal connection with God. These can be rare and brief, but they are where we experience that intimate relationship with God that we and he so desire.

I remember listening to a talk about prayer given by Fr. Joseph Mary of the CFRs. He said something that has stuck with me for years and has actually helped me to experience some of those intimate moments. We often take a long laundry list of petitions to God when we pray, asking him a multitude of questions. Fr. Joseph Mary suggested that we should just ask only one thing and then shut up!!! That's the part that is hard for us to do, to shut up and listen. If we can do that then we are much more likely to hear that still, small voice through which he often speaks.

We here at IHM have a blessed opportunity to practice that quiet, personal prayer. It is in our Adoration Chapel that is always open. It is an opportunity of which I encourage you to take advantage.

Praying each day is enormously important. Fr. Riccardo says that if we don't have a daily, habitual discipline of prayer, not just saying prayers but talking and listening to God, then our friendship with him is an illusion. That sounds a bit harsh, but I'm afraid that it's true.

We started off by recognizing that God's call to us is first and foremost a call to relationship. It is through our intimate, personal relationship with him, nurtured by prayer, that we begin to recognize what he is calling us to do. We begin to recognize that he is calling us to be a disciple. But what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? What do we do?

God has given us everything we have, all our worldly stuff, our personality, our unique talents, he has given us our very life. If we wish to answer his call to discipleship, we must give it all back to God.

Jesus is the ultimate example of giving it all to God. Exactly how each of us does that will depend on our individual gifts. Through imitating Jesus' total self giving love, we can truly say “yes” to his call to go work in his vineyard. It is through our “yes” to his call that we become disciples of Jesus. And that is what it means to be a Christian. That is our goal if we want to do the Father's will like the first son in the parable.

If you watched the video series with us this summer, you may have noticed that I've taken a lot from Fr. John Riccardo's talks. If you feel convicted or touched by anything I have said, I highly recommend that you watch his videos. They are YouTube videos which we have made available to you through Formed which is easily accessible through our parish web site, ihmcc.org.

I'll leave you with one last thought about our call to discipleship. It is a line from Psalm 95 that beckons us to respond to God: *“If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts”*.