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# What Do You Think?

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What Do You Think?<sup>©</sup>  
A play for the chancel based on Matthew 21: 28-32  
A play for actors and singers by John Steven Paul  
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose,  
The Liturgical Drama Troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre

Characters

A STORY-TELLER, *who will later be called by the **name of the actor** playing the role ANNA, a member of the audience*<sup>1</sup>

A FATHER

DAVID, *the first son, who will later be called by the **name of the actor** playing the role JON, the second son, who will later be called by the **name of the actor** playing the role*

*The play is introduced with a reading of Matthew 21: 28-32, the Gospel appointed to be read on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A): September 26, 1999.*

Story-Teller.

*(reading)*

*The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the twenty first chapter.*

28 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

29 "'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

30 "Then the FATHER went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

31 "Which of the two did what his FATHER wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

32 For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

The Word of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> When a male actor plays this role, the character's name is ANSON

Story-Teller.

Jesus tells the parable of “The Two Sons” at a very late point in his ministry on earth. It is a day or two after the triumphal procession into Jerusalem, which we now call Palm Sunday. Jesus’ audience is the Pharisees. It goes without saying that these people refuse to accept his authority as a preacher and a teacher. They question Jesus about the source of his authority. Jesus does not answer the Pharisees directly. Instead, he asks them by whose authority John, called the Baptist, preached.

The Pharisees now face a dilemma: if they say that his authority comes from people only, they will have to answer to the crowd, who all believed John to be a true prophet. If they say John’s authority came from God, then they are bound to accept John’s word as truth, including what he has said about Jesus. So, they say, simply, “we don’t know.”

Jesus, in a nice rhetorical turn-about says, then I won’t tell you from whom my authority comes either. It is with the issue of Jesus’ authority in the background that He begins the parable of “The Two Sons” with the simple and challenging question, “What do you think?”

“A man had two sons . . .

*THE FATHER enters. He has been brought in to speak from personal experience. He looks awkwardly at the STORY-TELLER for permission to begin. She nods.*

Father.

Hi. Yeah, I’m a father. I got two kids. Boys. You wouldn’t know it sometimes . . . that they’re brothers, I mean. *(pause)*

Story-Teller.

Why would that be?

Father.

Huh? Oh, yeah. Well, they’re different as night and day. Don’t get me wrong, they’re both my sons, if you know what I mean. But the one has . . . had trouble all the way along.

*The first son, DAVID, enters. FATHER and son silently acknowledge one another.*

Yeah, this is David. Starting when he was nine, he, uh, picked up some candy in a store that he didn’t intend to pay for, if you know what I mean.

First Son.

Yup, that's me. "Sticky Fingers." I just love how you keep telling that story on me, Pop.

Father.

*(explodes)* David! *(and regains his composure)* Ever since, it's been this or that. School problems, home problems, playground problems. Something fishy's always going on. And, he never got any help from his friends to walk the straight and narrow, either, if you know what I mean. And maybe there've been some drugs here and there. *(He looks at his son, who keeps his eyes on the ground).* I don't even want to think about it. And, then he was with some kids and stole a car. Thank God he wasn't driving. As it was he got six months detention. *(STORY-TELLER and THE FATHER look at DAVID. They indicate to him that it's his turn to say something.)*

First Son.

I'm one of the "bad" kids. B. A. D. You've heard of me. You've read about me. We've been around for a long time. Remember Cain? You know the Prodigal Son? He's one of us. And how about all these boys with guns in school? Right. You got the picture. We're all related. What makes us bad? Hard to tell. Lots of ideas along the way: original sin, cursed, bad seed, nasty environment, hyperactive, depressed. Bad. And, what's worse, smart! I've done it all, too. Broke almost every one of the Ten Commandments: lied, a lot. Dissed my mother and father. Coveted everything everybody else had and then found a way to steal it. You want me to go on? *(FATHER groans)*

Story-Teller.

No, thank you. That's fine. *(to the FATHER)* Tell us about your other son, if you would please.

Father.

The other kid is just the opposite. He's "All Everything." Really great. Good student. Cleans up his room. Does chores. Keeps his clothes neat and looks sharp. Doesn't back-talk me. A soccer star! A credit to the family. Even goes to church.

*The second son, JON, enters.*

Second son.

Hi, Pop!

Father.

Hi'ya, kid. This is Jon. The younger one. What've you got to say for yourself, boy?

Second Son.

Well, first of all, I'm not calling myself "good." That's up to someone else to judge. I guess my philosophy has always been that some things are right and some things are wrong. And, you're expected to do what's right. Doing the right thing is actually doing the practical thing too. Because, if you do the right thing, people like you and they do good things for you, in return. For example, I've been doing what my father expected of me ever since I can remember. And now it's paying off. He's sending me to the university next year. I got an academic and a soccer scholarship.

Father.

It's still expensive.

Second Son.

I know. I'll do good, I mean, *well*.

First Son.

*(Way under his breath.)* Oh, brother.

Story-teller.

*(to THE FATHER)* Now, tell us what happened recently, when you asked them to do something for you.

Father.

Well, one day this summer, I needed some help down at the shop. I got this big order to get out and I can't find anybody to work. It's a make or break order, if you know what I mean. There's a lot riding on it. So I come home at night and they're both sitting there. And I say, "Hey, fellas, I really need you for a couple of days to get this order out . . . ."

First Son.

Why should I come down the shop? I don't see that I ever get anything out of it.

Father.

Because *I* said come *down* there.

First Son.

I'll, uh, see. I got a lot a stuff happening in the next few days. Important stuff. I'll see what I can do, but . . . don't count on me. *(Exits)*.

Father.

Jon?

Second Son.

Sure, Pop. 7:00 OK? (*FATHER nods. SECOND SON exits.*)

Father.

So, the next morning, I'm ready to pull out at about 6:30 and neither one of them is in sight. I'm . . . annoyed. But, I can't sit around fussing. Somebody's got to do the work or we don't eat, or a lot of other things, if you know what I mean. So I drive like a bat out of-- I'm surprised I wasn't picked up for speeding. (*FIRST SON re-enters*) And who's there when I get there? Right. (*SECOND SON re-entering*) But the one who's spending my money at college never put in another day's work for the rest of the summer. This one (*points to FIRST SON*) has been doing everything including setting out the garbage. Go figure! (*FATHER and FIRST SON look at one another.*)

Story-teller.

(*to the audience*) So, what do you think? Which one did the will of the Father? The son with the history of bad behavior or the son who--

*ANNA, a member of the audience, abruptly gets up from her chair in the audience and interrupts STORY-TELLER.*

Anna.

You know, I've heard this parable a hundred times. And, no offense, I'm enjoying your little play here. Really. I know what we're supposed to say now: we're supposed to say, "The first son." And then you say, or Jesus, or somebody says something like "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom ahead of you." Right?

Story-teller.

Well, yes, that's what Jesus says and we were coming to that.

Anna.

Well, dear, I think we're all ahead of you out here. (*she looks around for support*) Every time I hear this story I'm impressed by Jesus's point that no matter how sinful people have been, as long as they believe in him they are going into the kingdom of heaven. But, you know, really, the longer I live and the more I see, I'm more and more doubtful about the *value* of this parable. In fact, I think it's downright pernicious.

First Son.

It's what?

Anna.

Destructive.

Story-teller.

How so?

Anna.

I've seen this parable tear a community apart. What you're saying is that to be like Jesus, you have to avoid making *any* moral judgments about *anybody*.

*THE FATHER quietly, unobtrusively exits.*

Story-teller.

This parable isn't about morality, it's about having faith in the authority of Christ or not having faith.

Anna.

You're telling me the first son there hasn't acted immorally?

Story-teller.

I'm saying it isn't the point of the story. It's a question of belief in Jesus or unbelief. That's it.

Anna.

And, anybody who "chooses" to do God's will at any point in time is going into the kingdom of God, no matter what they've ever done.

Story-teller.

That's right.

Anna.

And more than that, they're going into the kingdom ahead of us and we have basically nothing to say about it. So, we might as well throw open the doors of the church and serve coffee and cake

to every low-life who comes our way.

Story-teller.

Wait a minute, who's "we"?

Anna.

Good people. Decent people. Church-goers. Like him. (*Points to the SECOND SON who flinches and moves away.*)

Story-teller.

And he's (*indicating DAVID*) one of the low-lives?

Anna.

In my judgment.

Story-teller.

No one has the authority to judge except God.

Anna.

And you, perhaps. (*The STORY-TELLER is stung for a moment and then begins to protest but ANNA waves a hand to quiet her.*) You kids. It's all so easy for you. Ideas to make plays out of. Wait until you really have to face the problem. Let's see if you keep the doors open for drug addicts.

Story-teller.

It's what Jesus would do.

Anna.

How about thieves who'll steal the candlesticks off the altar? What do you think?

Story-teller.

Thieves can have a change of heart and do God's will.

Second Son.

Why don't we back off a little, A.<sup>2</sup> I think this lady may have a point.

Story-teller.

And, what point would that be, B?

Second Son.

That we may not know what we're talking about.

Story-teller.

I'm quoting the Bible. We're not making this up.

Second Son.

It's a parable, A, not a commandment. It's subject to interpretation depending on--

Story-teller.

Depending on what?

Anna.

Depending on your situation.

Story-teller.

Could you be a little more specific?

Anna.

Depending on who you find yourself sitting next to on Sunday.

Second Son.

I know it can get really uncomfortable, ma'am. My parents go to a downtown church back home. More and more the church is just a shelter for drunks, drug addicts, and people with no place to go. They wander into the service on Sunday morning. It's--

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<sup>2</sup> The actors now speak to each other using their own names. Liv Larson was the first person to play this role at Valparaiso University

Story-teller.

It's what, B?

Second Son.

It's disgusting. Did you ever come to church on a Sunday morning to find out somebody using the homeless shelter urinated up and down the hallway the night before?

Story-teller.

No, thankfully, but that's a typically extreme example from you, B. In the vast majority of cases--

Second Son.

C'mon, A, you know there are certain people you won't even sit next to in the cafeteria, much less go to church with.

Story-teller.

Like who?

Second Son.

You want me to just list them out right here in front of all these people.

Story-teller.

No!

Anna.

So, "it does matter," huh? Here's one for you. One "gentleman" who's in my church every Sunday used to own two pornography shops in town. Five years ago, he was convicted of sending "pictures" of children through the mail.

First Son.

*(Who has been standing alone, quietly, during all of this)* Have you ever spoken with him?

Anna.

Absolutely not. I won't go near him. And you can't make me believe that even Jesus would have us open the doors to pornographers.

Story-teller.

Well, I suppose that even Jesus had his lim--

Anna.

Would you like some details about his . . . merchandise? Maybe the pastor should invite him to teach Sunday school, too. What do you think?

Story-teller.

*No!* I don't know exactly what I think, but you can't let him near children. There is a limit. *(She looks around, defeated.)* I guess we're finished here.

*ANNA resumes her seat. STORY-TELLER and SECOND SON begin to exit. FIRST SON still on stage, has knelt down under the burden of sadness and shame. The FATHER, who disappeared some time after the play was interrupted, now returns to the edge of the stage, entering from the opposite side from where the STORY-TELLER and SECOND SON have exited. THE FATHER moves to the FIRST SON, lifts him up and they embrace. A solo instrument<sup>3</sup> now begins to play the tune "Amazing Grace." FATHER and FIRST SON slowly exit, FATHER'S arm around his son, passing in front of the STORY-TELLER and SECOND SON. Just before he disappears from sight, the FATHER turns back to look at SECOND SON and the STORY-TELLER who then follow FIRST SON off stage. The FATHER embraces both of them as they pass by him. Finally, ANNA gets up from her chair and moves toward the FATHER. They embrace and exit together.*

**END**

In response, the congregation sings "Amazing Grace"

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<sup>3</sup> clarinet or violin