

Chapel Words (October 4, 2008)—Rev. Jim Holland

But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first, and said, "Son, go work today in my vineyard." He answered, "I will not," but afterward the first son changed his mind, and went. He came to the second, and said the same thing. The second son answered, "I go, sir," but he didn't go.

"Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly I tell you that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering into the Kingdom of God before you."

Whenever I hear a story that begins with the phrase "a man had two sons" I am immediately interested. I am both the father of two sons and the son of a father who has two sons. I have one brother, a few years older than me.

The parable of the two sons is a simple story. A man says to one of his sons, (I suspect it is his older son), "Go into the vineyard and do some work". The son says "No way," but later he changes his mind and does what his father has asked him to do. Then the father asks his other son, (no doubt the younger), to do some work in the vineyard. The other son says, "Sure, no problem," but he doesn't do what his father has asked.

This particular story always reminds me of an event—or a series of events—that happened to me when I was about 13 years old. My father was a military man and his idea of a hair cut was to go to the barber in town who had a clipper the size of a small lawn mower. He would run this thing over your head and you would come out looking like Mr. and Ms. Kingstone (who have had their heads shaved for the Tour de Rock).

Close-cropped crew cuts were fine while I was a little kid. However, by the time I was entering my teen years, about 1968, they were definitely not "in." Long hair was the fashion, and in those days fashion was very important to teenagers, unlike today. So when my father asked me to get my haircut one day I really didn't want to. But I said the only thing I could say, which was "Sure I'll go soon." Then I realized that was all my father wanted to hear. He was happy with me just *saying* I would go. A week or so later he asked me again, "I thought you were going to get your haircut." "Oh, I am," I said. "I just didn't have time this week."

A few days after that, I came upon my older brother and my father in a terrible argument. My father was saying "I am going to take you to get your haircut right now, get in the car." As they were leaving my brother pointed to me and said, "Look, Jim's hair is longer than mine. How come he doesn't

have to go?” And my father said, “It’s OK. He told me he is going to go to the barber this week.”

I don’t tell this story because I feel good about being so dishonest with my father. I realize now how manipulative I was. And, of course, I have been punished. My father is 87, and he has more hair than my brother and me combined!

It was only when I became a parent that I fully understood this parable. I have two sons, as I say. The older one was like my older brother, and like the first brother in the story. He has always taken his mother and I on directly. The younger was more like me and finds ways around direct confrontation. The other day I went into his room where he was busily killing monsters on his computer screen. I asked him to wash the dishes that he had left on the kitchen counter. “Sure,” he said. I left the room satisfied, but a minute later I went back in and asked him, “What did I just ask you to do.” He stopped playing computer, looked up at me and said, “I have absolutely no idea.”

Obviously I am not telling these stories because I want to put myself, or my son, in a bad light. I am simply saying that it is easy to fall prey to the temptation to say “yes” when we mean “no.” There are a million ways to say no. The point of the parable of the two sons is to be responsible enough to be honest when we say “no” to someone who has asked us to do something. None of us likes to disappoint others, but it is not helpful or polite to agree to do something when we have no intention of doing it. It is in fact dishonest to do so.

On Thursday, the Headmaster spoke about hypocrisy, which he so clearly defined as saying one thing and doing another. And, as he said, none of us wants to be a hypocrite. The opposite of hypocrisy is, of course, integrity. Which is what we call it when our words and our beliefs and our actions all line up with one another. People of integrity are people of whom we can say, “what you see is what you get.”

We have integrity when our promises can be trusted, when we try to live up to the expectations and standards that we have agreed to accept. Of course, we are not always perfect, but integrity is not about perfection, it is about intention. Someone once said, if you want to know what a person really believes is important don’t listen to their words, look at the way they live their life, look at how they spend their time, money and energy.

Once, when I was between jobs, I took a course on finding work. The one thing I remember from the course is the teacher saying that sometimes we get a job that doesn’t fit us; a job that doesn’t jive with our principles and our values. He said that when that happens it is like wearing a pair of shoes that are too small. And we all know what happens when we do that. We get blisters. The teacher said that when we are in a situation in which we are forced to compromise our values we get “soul blisters.”

If we lose our sense of integrity we will eventually feel it—that disconnect in ourselves, those soul blisters. Without integrity, our relationships cannot be healthy and open and honest. When I was dishonest

with my father, my relationship with him suffered. Without integrity trust begins to break down.

A lot has been said and written about integrity, but Francis Bacon says it quite well.

“It's not what we eat but what we digest that makes us strong; not what we gain but what we save that makes us rich; not what we read but what we remember that makes us learned; and not what we profess but what we practice that gives us integrity.”