September 27, 2026 Promised Hope in the Circle Game

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In 1966, singer/songwriter Neil Young was feeling the irony of his last name. He was getting older and realizing growing up wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Aging brought lots of changes in his life. One change was going from being in a rock and roll band to writing and singing folk music, which is how he met singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell and the two became friends. But Neil struggled with the changes – both the good and the bad and he deeply grieved his lost youth, especially the things he could no longer do or be part of as he got older, and he shared his grief with Joni.

Joni felt differently about aging. To her, aging is just another change that is part of life. She learned from the changing seasons of the year that when one season ends another begins; like how right now summer is ending for us in the Northern Hemisphere, and autumn or fall is beginning. Seasonal change taught Joni that endings are the other side of beginnings that can bring new dreams, ideas, and opportunities. Which can be a hopeful way to interpret change. Joni wrote the song "The Circle Game" about how growing older is part of life like the seasons of the year for Neil to express her beliefs about change and to give him hope. Because she and other singers recorded the song, we all get to benefit from its message of hope that change can carry.

Of course, not all changes feel good. Some changes can be downright terrible, like illnesses, job loss, the closing of a business or institution, and death of a loved one. All changes, even good changes, include some amount of loss and grief. So, we might understand why change can be hard to accept. Not only for Neil Young, but for the religious leaders in today's Gospel.

The change the religious leaders that confronted Jesus in today's Gospel were upset about wasn't aging, at least that we know of. They were struggling with the change Jesus brought. Which is why Jesus mentioned John the Baptist. Remember, John the Baptist was the guy announcing people needed to ready for a big change; the change from waiting for the Messiah to show up to learning to recognize the Messiah among them. John called the people to get ready for that big change by changing themselves; to repent and return to following God's ways.

To be fair to the religious leaders, historically, there had been a lot of guys proclaiming to be the Messiah. They were pretty convincing, so much so that some people followed them into battle against the Roman Empire in relatively small military squirmishes and lost. Despite these loses, it was hard to change from believing the Messiah was going to be a violent military leader who would go to war against the Roman Empire, defeat the empire, and restore Isreal to political power. The religious leaders and many people of Jesus' day didn't want to imagine anything different. That made it hard to change, even when someone as unusual as John the Baptist tried to tell them.

But change is what Jesus lifted up in today's Gospel. We might miss this at first because the parable Jesus told seems to be about the difference between what a person says and what they do. For example, the first son told his father 'no' when asked to work in the vineyard but later changed his mind and did what his father asked. The second son gave the answer his father wanted but did not do the work. The way Jesus told the parable, only one son changed his mind: the one who went to work in the vineyard. Even though the second son said one thing and did another, Jesus never said he changed his mind. Which could indicate the second son never intended to go work in the vineyard.

Biblical scholars tell us the first son in the parable represents the tax collectors and prostitutes Jesus referenced in today's Gospel whose lives could be considered sinful and contrary to the way God wants people to live, who changed their minds when they heard John the Baptist's message, and then made changes in their lives. The second son represents the religious leaders who heard the same message but did not change their minds and therefore could not recognize who Jesus is, even when they witnessed others doing it.

This interpretation can be helpful and give meaning and depth to Jesus' parable. But we have to be careful that it doesn't also justify distancing ourselves from today's Gospel. Jesus criticism to the religious leaders was their failure to recognize him as the Messiah because they couldn't change, even when they witnessed other people changing.

Being in the seasonal change from summer to fall might help us reflect deeper on any changes Jesus might be calling us to consider. Afterall, as Joni Mitchell sang in her song, change is part of life, which means change can be holy when we recognize God is present in it. Again, I know not every change is good. Some are terrible. However, if we only recognize the terrible part of change, we could miss what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel and miss the invitation he might be giving us today.

One example of a change we might be called to consider here at St. Matthias is discerning how the green space next to the shed by the small parking lot might be better utilized to reflect God's love of the earth and people to our neighbors. That does not mean there is anything wrong with that space now. It just means there might be something we can do with it besides mowing the grass. Maybe it could be an outdoor prayer space, perhaps it could be made into a small community garden or pollinator garden, a place to sit and rest, a place to give water to the dogs that people walk past the church building every day, there are lots of possibilities. Imagining possibilities like this is part of observing the Season of Creation Care. This means changing how we think about our outdoor spaces, which like today's Gospel suggests might be difficult to do, but like Joni Mitchell promises in her song, there is hope and help. The mission of the Creation Care Commission of the Diocese of Wisconsin is to help parishes like ours with the gift of green space figure out how those spaces might more deeply engage in God's love of the earth and people. To learn to recognize that space as a gift and opportunity. On Tuesday, you are all invited to take the first steps towards this discernment with me by meeting Susan Gillespie, a member of the Creation Care Commission at our Creation Care potluck. She will speak to us about the financial and spiritual resources they have that can help us. I hope you will be able to join an evening of fellowship and inspiration and an opportunity for us to participate in what Joni Mitchell calls the Circle Game where change can bring hope over despair and connection over isolation all through God's love present right here on earth.