

26th Sunday Year A, September 25, 2011

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

“Tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you”

These words of Jesus were part of the cause of his crucifixion. They occur when Jesus is preaching in the temple shortly after entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and just a few days before he is put to death on the cross. In the time of Jesus, the people of Israel were being oppressively ruled by the imperial power of Rome. The tax collectors not only took money in an often corrupt way from the Israelites, but they were collaborators with the Roman oppressor. They violated the Jewish law or torah in multiple ways. Prostitutes were also big time violators of the law or torah. Being a prostitute is virtually identical with being a sinner in the biblical story.

So when Jesus tells the chief priests and elders of Israel that “tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” it is not surprising that this makes them very angry. In fact, Jesus did this sort of thing regularly. He called the tax collector Matthew to be one of his apostles. He told a prostitute that she was forgiven and would be welcome at the table of God’s kingdom. Tax collectors and prostitutes are the ultimate outsiders because of their violation of the law of Israel, and yet Jesus regularly welcomes them to eat with him. One can almost feel the hot words of the priests and elders to Jesus: don’t

you know the law! Don't you know what illegal means! And yet Jesus welcomes these lawbreakers who should be treated as total outsiders. And he goes farther; these lawbreakers are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you righteous priests and elders. It is no wonder that this teaching got him in trouble—trouble that ended with his crucifixion.

A similar situation in our country today is how we respond to immigrants, especially those who have violated the law in entering the US. In the gospel today, Jesus calls us to welcome outsiders. Today the US bishops have asked us to reflect on a particularly strong example of this call—our call to welcome young adult migrants who, through no fault of their own, were brought into the United States illegally as children. Right now, thousands of hard-working young people who were brought to the United States as children or infants want to go to college and pursue the American dream. Instead many of them are being detained and deported to countries they have never known.

The good news is that a bill known as the DREAM Act could stop this deportation. The DREAM Act gives students who have graduated from high school in the U.S an opportunity to earn legal status and citizenship through higher education or military service. Last year the bill was voted down in congress, but it is still a live question as we seek a just resolution of the immigration question.

The temptation when considering the fate of these young people is to say: they are illegal, and what aspect of the meaning of illegal don't you understand? That response would be something like the response of the elders of Israel to Jesus when he welcomes tax collectors and prostitutes: Jesus, don't you believe in obeying the law or the torah? If you don't, you are not one of us. So we will have to take the steps needed to get rid of you. So the elders who want to be faithful to the torah become elders who start the process that leads to Jesus's crucifixion.

In fact, Jesus wants us to recognize that being faithful to the law is not the whole story of what God calls us to. What God calls us to act the way Jesus did-- *inclusively* rather than exclusively. People who appear obedient to the law from the start—like the elders in today's gospel-- may never really know to the depth of God's mercy and the inclusive scope of God's love. They may not really be able to know God as God really is.

Today's gospel tells us that what ultimately determines our worthiness is conformity of our heart of to the inclusively loving heart of God. This means welcome strangers—even illegal strangers—with open hearts, including the young migrants who have a dream of a new life for themselves. Let's pray that we, and our country, can become more inclusively loving toward the young men and women who have a dream that they could truly be at home among us.