

An O. Henry Twist or Two – Matthew 21:23-32

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One of favourite stories in our family, when the kids were little, was *Tikki Tikki Tembo*. Do some of you know it? Like the parable we heard this morning, it is also a story about two sons, but a woman with two sons. The first *and honoured* son, the story says, she called *Tikki tikki tembo-no sa rembo-chari bari ruchi-pip peri pembo* which means ‘the most wonderful thing in the whole wide world’, but the second son she called *Chang* which means ‘little or nothing’.

Now the humour (or the drama) in the story is that when the first son falls into a deep well, and his brother runs all the way back to tell their mother, he is so out of breath that he can’t say his brother’s name properly, “Honourable Mother!” *Chang gasped, “Chari bari rembo tikki tikki pip pip has fallen into the well!”* and his mother makes him repeat the name until he gets it right, all of which heightens the tension and the time it takes to rescue *Tikki tikki tembo-no sa rembo-chari bari ruchi-pip peri pembo* from the well. Which is why, the story concludes, Chinese people now give their children short names, a conclusion which says more about Western cultural bias than Chinese culture!

I also discovered this week that the story the story is based on is not even Chinese! It comes from the Japanese storytelling tradition – *rakugo* – and the name in the Japanese version is even more of a tongue twister. It is *Jugemu jugemu (寿限無、寿限無) gokō-no surikire (五劫の擦り切れ) kaijarisuigyo-no (海砂利水魚の) suigyōmatsu unraimatsu fūraimatsu (水行末雲来末風来末) kuunerutokoro-ni sumutokoro (食う寝る処に住む処) yaburakōji-no burakōji (やぶら小路の藪柑子) paipopaipo paipo-no-shūringan (パイポパイポパイポのシューリングン) shūringan-no gūrindai (シューリングンのグーリンダイ) gūrindai-no ponpokopī-no ponpokonā-n (グーリンダイのポンポコピーのポンポコナーの) chōkyūmei-no chōsuke (長久命の長助).*

What my children loved about the story – apart from the story itself – is that whenever Aron was asked to say it, he could never get *Tikki Tikki Tembo*’s name right! He was always mispronouncing parts of it or jumbling them up, and in a story about the younger ones gaining some ascendancy over their elders and supposed betters, the kids delighted in correcting him over and over again and making him say it over and over again. And Aron – I will give him the benefit of the doubt – enjoyed playing along.

Now the parable that Jesus tells in Matthew 21:28-32 has several similarities to *Tikki Tikki Tembo*. Firstly, as I mentioned before, it is about two sons. Secondly it also sets about dismantling the systems that we, human beings, build which give authority and value to some and devalue others. This is what happens at the beginning of this passage where the chief priests and the elders confront Jesus, asking, “By what authority are you doing what you’re doing – *disrupting the financially lucrative offering system (back in verse 12), healing people who are blind and lame when you are not one of us (verse 14), inspiring children to call you the ‘Son of David’ a Messianic title in their songs (verse 15)* – and who gave you this authority?” And Jesus, in return, asks them where John the Baptist’s authority came from – was it from heaven or from humans? And their inability to answer shows up how very human their own authority is, that it is about placating the Romans and staying in power, not about their compassion for the people or any desire to seek the will of God.

Thirdly, just like *Tikki Tikki Tembo's* name, this parable, which is unique to Matthew, has suffered over the years, as it has been copied by the scribes in different parts of the world, from a little bit of jumbling up! The result being that there are now many variants from which to draw! In an article I read this week, Daniel Wallace, professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary outlines them in this way:

In Version 1, just as in the version in our Bibles, the first son says “No” and later changes his mind, and the second son says “Yes,” but does not go. So far, no changes, but when Jesus asks his audience, “Which of the two did the will of the Father?” they answer, “The second.” What! That makes no sense. And according to the scholars that’s right because with this particular text type and codex carelessness on the part of the scribe is not out of the question. This version has very little textual support.

Version 2 is the one in our Bibles, that we read (or paraphrased) this morning. In this the first son says, “No” and later changes his mind and the second son says, “Yes, I go, sir.” But doesn’t. And, in keeping with the parable’s emphasis on doing the will of God, not just claiming to do the will of God, the first son is identified as doing his father’s will.

In Version 3 the responses of the two sons are swapped. The first son says, “Yes, I will go,” but doesn’t, and the second son says, “Forget it, dad, I’m busy,” but then reconsiders his response and goes. And, with the same logic as Version 2, the parable then identifies the second son as the faithful and obedient one.

Now it is very tempting to go with Version 3. It makes sense – as I imagine it would have to Jesus’ original audience of chief priests, elders of the people, regular people and his disciples – that the son mentioned first, the older son, the first and honoured son (to borrow the phrase from *Tikki Tikki Tembo*) would represent the religious elite who Jesus is critiquing. And it fits with a much more high-profile story in this ‘two brothers’ tradition, the prodigal son, where the older brother does represent those who object to a God who not only welcomes prodigals but recklessly, extravagantly pours out prodigal forgiveness and love on them. It also matches the reality of the gospel account where Gentiles and tax collectors and prostitutes, people not originally seen as part of God’s family, are the ones who respond to first John’s and then Jesus’ teaching, and form the new community of faith that seeks to be obedient to the will of God.

There is a reason, however, for why our Bibles contain the version they do. The textual evidence for Version 3 is weaker than Version 2, and Daniel Wallace cautions against preferencing a version just because of how neatly it fits. Jesus’ parables do not always follow a predictable pattern.

But, he adds, the order of Version 2, our version, seems to be intentional and if it is intentional then Jesus’ story packs a powerful rhetorical punch! “A man had two sons, Jesus says, he went to the first and said, ‘Son, and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went.” The chief priests and religious leaders would have seen themselves as the eldest son. Yes, it was appalling for a son in middle eastern culture to answer his father in this way, but they would have strongly identified as those who did the father’s will. But then comes, Wallace says, the O. Henry twist: “The Pharisees are not the first son, but the second!” “Truly I tell you, tax collectors, crooks, and whores are going ahead of you into God’s Kingdom– or it can be translated – going to lead you into God’s kingdom. They – not you - have become the authority on how to do the will of God, in the same way that little children, infants that are still breastfed– not you – have become the experts in offering God praise!

Read like this, this parable is a powerful indictment of those who rejected the message of John and were rejecting the message of Jesus. You claim to be doing God's will, Jesus says to them, but you are not doing anything, whereas those who seemed alienated from God have responded, they are working in that metaphorical vineyard that represented the sphere of God's activity and care, they have found the way of righteousness.

...If you are wondering if an O. Henry twist is an obscure theological term. It isn't! O. Henry was the pen name of the much-loved American short story writer, William Sydney Porter, whose stories are known for their surprise, plot twist endings.

And so – as this has been a sermon about stories and parables – stories containing tongue twisters and parables with twists in their tales – I want to finish by telling you a story. It is not an O. Henry short story, but it's a true story I heard many years ago and it reminds me that there is a further, a final, twist in this parable regarding the character of the father, the one representing God. If you think about it, both sons in the story are disobedient – they shame their father – one by giving him lip and the other by only paying him lip service – but the father does not deliver retribution. Just as in prodigal son story, the outcome is open. That story ends with the older son standing outside the house, the father there with him, holding his hand out to him and inviting him to come and join the feast. This parable, too, holds out an appeal for the chief priests, like the others, to change their minds and do the will of God after all.

My story comes from a playgroup I was part of years ago and one day we started talking about adoption and discovered that in the group were several stories of people discovering family, brothers and sisters, parents, aunts and uncles, they hadn't previously known they had and one woman told the story of her mother who, grew up on Sydney's lower north shore and trained as a nurse and decided to spread her wings a little and work in Canada for a couple of years.

It was a very social scene and – after a very brief relationship with another young traveller like herself – she found herself pregnant. She considered abortion, but her upbringing went against that, so she decided to have the baby and enjoy the baby – just for a little while – and then find a good institution that would care for it when she had to return home to Australia because her parents, her family and friends, would be devastated to discover what she had done. And that's what she did - when the time came for her to return, she put the child into care and boarded her ship – and wept every day of that long journey home....

But when she reached Sydney she decided to paste a bright smile on her face because there were family and friends to meet her, and parties to welcome her home, but it had only been a day or so and her mother said to her, "Something is terribly wrong. Tell me what is wrong." And the whole story gushed out of her and her mother said, "Get back on that boat – your father and I will pay for it - and go and get my granddaughter. She belongs here. She's part of our family."

And the woman telling the story said, "And that baby was me! If it wasn't for my grandmother I would be a Canadian. I wouldn't be here!"

If it wasn't for the searching embracing love of our God none of us would be here wither. We are called to serve a God – not who wields authority like the powers of our world – but who welcomes us in a loving embrace regardless of where we have come from and sends us out to bring others into this family.