Matthew 21:23-32 (NRSV): When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ’Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ’I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ’I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

When you look at a field of athletes, can you spot the champion? What if you were watching an athlete struggle, could you see the potential for greatness? And would you celebrate when the struggling athlete finally becomes a champion? I suppose it depends on which team you are rooting for.

How much interest would you have in a quarterback that wasn’t good enough to play for a Junior Varsity team whose win-loss record was 0-8? What if he ended up seventh on the depth chart on his college team, struggling with frustration and anxiety? Would you pay attention if he was picked in the 6th round for the NFL draft as the 199th overall pick? Would you celebrate if he finally succeeded? How would you describe that athlete? What would you call him? In Boston, they call him a champion, because Tom Brady is one of the best quarterbacks in NFL history. Can we see the champion in Tom Brady? Perhaps our own experience watching him help defeat the Falcons in the Super Bowl makes it hard for us to celebrate. When we see Tom Brady, do we focus on his failures and shortcomings? Or do we see the champion that he can be?

Even Albert Einstein struggled with failure. He failed to achieve academic standards in high school, and took a job at the patent office while struggling to find a job in the academic world. Every champion, every scholar, every hero starts out struggling just like the rest of us, and everyone has experienced challenges and failure. We fail in our endeavors, we fail each other and ourselves, and we fail God. When we look at ourselves, what do we see? When God looks at us, what does God see?

When Jesus came to us, he brought a message of challenge and hope. His central theme was similar to the preaching of John the Baptist: “Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” Jesus brings challenge, implying that things are not as they should be. But Jesus also brings hope, implying that things can be different than they are, and that God’s grace will help us repent. Jesus calls us to repent not out of anger or a desire to punish, but out of a deep desire to bring out the best in us, to see us turn to God and thrive in the new life that awaits us through
him. Jesus has a positive and hopeful message about the Kingdom of Heaven, about the power of
God at work in people’s lives. But some people had a hard time hearing that message.

The Chief priests and the elders wanted great things for Israel, but they saw how sin and
infidelity to God led to the downfall of their nation. So they stressed purity and holiness, and
feared the impact that sinners would have on their country. So when they saw Jesus associating
with tax collectors and prostitutes, they were bitter about him and his teaching. They challenged
him, asking him by what authority he taught his message. But they weren’t really interested in a
response; they were simply looking for an excuse to reject Jesus and his message. And they
weren’t listening to his message.

But could you blame them? Think about how hard it was for the priests to maintain fidelity to
God when some of their own people, Jews, were working for the Roman Empire to collect pagan
taxes? And these tax collectors always took way more than the tax from people, keeping the rest
for themselves. It was an extortion racket that stole from poor people. How could Jesus associate
with them? Didn’t Jesus see their sin? And what of the prostitutes who led men astray, some of
whom were connected to pagan temples? What could Jesus see in them? Didn’t he see their sin?

I think that we know that kind of contempt in our own lives. We see public figures make
statements and take actions that offend us deeply. We have colleagues at work or at school that
just seem so mean all the time. We know friends and family who have betrayed our trust and hurt
us repeatedly. Each time we hear some new story of what someone has done, it just makes us
more and more mad—further reinforcing the irritation and cynicism that we already feel about
them.

What do we see when we look at them? We see the same thing we’ve always seen. We overlook
the positive and we amplify the negative and chew on it like a cow ruminating its previous meal.
We get caught up in this process until, in any interaction with our adversary, we assume evil
intentions and selfish motives on their part—even when they do something good. Most of all, we
assume that they won’t change and can’t change. We assume the worst in people, and give them
no benefit of the doubt. And often, truth be told, our enemies live up to our expectations.

Of course, if we get a lot of practice thinking this way, then it is easy to respond this way to more
and more people. Suspicion leads to more and more isolation. And eventually, we turn that same
cynicism on ourselves. We know about our own failings. We know those sins that stick around,
those bad habits that we can’t seem to shake. And if we applied the same judgment to ourselves,
then we feel we could never measure up. Certainly, we assume that God could never love us, so
we turn away from God in shame. When God looks at us, what does God see? We don’t even
want to think about it.

This is where the chief priests and elders were when Jesus came to them. This is where the tax
collectors and prostitutes were when Jesus came to them. But Jesus has a bigger vision than what
they could see. Jesus challenges each of them for their sin, yes, but Jesus brings them hope—
hope in repentance and in the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus, like John the Baptist,
pictured repentance and the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. And some of the tax collectors
and prostitutes heard that message and came to repentance. They turned from their sin and they
returned to God. The joy of that turning was a significant part of Jesus’ message. But the priests and elders couldn’t see that joy, and didn’t want to listen.

So Jesus tells the parable of the two sons: one who promised to obey his father but didn’t, and the other who refused his father, but later repented and did obey him. The priests and elders rightly say that the son who repented was the one who obeyed him. Jesus challenges them to apply it to Jesus’ work and to themselves. In their fear of what sinners would do for the nation, they couldn’t see the potential for redemption in them. Could they see the possibilities of what God was doing in those sinners? Could they then rejoice when sinners turn from their sin, change their ways and return to God? Could they see the champion of virtue in the struggling sinner?

A colleague of mine in a church I once served had an uncanny knack for bringing out the best in people. Forgive me if I’ve told this story before, but I remember how exasperated I could become in dealing with some difficult people in the church. Of course, we’re all a little difficult sometime, but a few people were experts at it. And yet my colleague, deeply grounded in prayer, could speak with them in such a way as to challenge them and to bring out the best in them. She saw the small places where God was doing something in their lives. She found where God the Holy Spirit was at work—that ember of holy fire whose flames she could fuel with grace and mercy until some of the most difficult people offered their best to God. It was a glorious thing to watch!

Bishop Wimberly quoted someone who said that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future. Can you tell which is which? Can you spot the champion in the struggling spiritual athlete? Can you rejoice when they turn to God? Can you celebrate when that old adversary does something kind—something good?

Wherever we’ve been, God rejoices when we turn to him. God sees who we can become in Christ, even as we struggle, like the struggling athlete. Can we see what God sees? Can we see the possibilities of who others can become in Christ?

When Jesus declares that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, part of his message is calling attention to what God is doing in people’s lives. Jesus wants us to see more and more of the reality of God reaching out to us in grace and mercy, helping us to repent, challenging us to bring out the best in us. Jesus wants us to see God at work and rejoice at what God is doing in us and even in what God is doing in those sinners who have offended or hurt us.

What if we would look for Christ at work in the lives of those who trouble us? What if we tried to participate in that work of redemption? Can we see them less as “difficult people” and more as brothers and sisters in Christ—sinners whom Christ died to save? God sees who we can become in Christ. Can we see others as God sees them?

Jesus calls us to look for where God is at work in people’s lives. Even in our adversaries, look for that place where God has a foothold, a handhold, some place of virtue that would flourish with enough light. Even when we have to speak the hard word or the challenge, we can do so in love, looking always for the opportunity for restoration and renewal.
This is what God does for us, of course. God sees who you can become in Christ. You may not realize it, but God is calling to you from all around you—through scripture and through people and experiences and the internal chatter and disquiet within you. God sees not just the struggle and weakness, but God sees the champion in you. God sees the saint in you. God sees the beloved child whose repentance makes him rejoice!

Can we see in ourselves what God sees?
Can we see in others what God sees?
Can we rejoice as God rejoices?