In the hymn to Christ, shared in our second reading for today, we learn that "Jesus, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness…"(Philippians 2:6-7) This self-emptying is what is meant by the word kenosis. Kenosis was required for what we call an incarnation, the act of God entering into his own creation as one with us. This is a powerful sign of God's humility and God's invitation to share in divine nature. (2 Peter 1:4) "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." (St. Athanasius) What does this mean for us?

The invitation is clear. Just as Jesus can and did assume the form of a slave, he invites us to the same process of kenosis. He did this when he washed the disciples' feet and invited them to do the same. (John 13:1-17) This is not about becoming a doormat for others; rather it is an invitation to empty oneself so that there is room for others in our lives and room for God within our very being. This is probably one of the most difficult things for one to do – I know - I struggle with letting go of my self/possessions. Making room for God and for others feels like the loss of self – maybe even dying to self. As St. Francis once said, "It is in dying to self that we are born to Eternal Life." (Canticle of the Sun)

At times we may accept the call to sacrifice our own desires for the good of others or even let go of our own agenda long enough to be present with God. Then the lure of power or prestige comes along and we forget our commitment. This is like the son in today's Gospel parable who first responds positively to the father's request, and then doesn't follow through on his promise. We shouldn't let our lack of follow-through disturb us too much, we always have the example of the other son who at first doesn't appear to cooperate with his father, but later relents and...
decides to do the right thing. The right action is not only his obedience to the father's will, but it is also the right thing for him personally because it brings him back to the joy of the right relationship with his father.

In today's Gospel Jesus reminds the priests and elders that it was the tax collectors and prostitutes – those judged as "sinners" by the Temple officials – who allow God to work in their lives and transform them to kingdom seekers. It is interesting to note that though we wish to "do it right" we may miss the mercy and loving invitation of God. For many "getting it wrong" is the path to eventual conversion and the commitment to respond to the call of the Spirit. It was John the Baptist who was the embodiment of that call from God, and John's baptism that inaugurated their return to lives destined for the Kingdom. It is this "second chance" that underlies God's never-failing mercy and forgiveness. Truly we have a God of second chances. The opportunity for a second chance is through our openness to admitting that we have gotten it wrong.

We too can be like prostitutes and tax collectors and put our former lives behind us and accept the gift of graceful mercy from God. Or, we can be blind to the fact that we may have invested too much in doing the right things – praying the right prayers – offering the right sacrifices; instead of having an open heart. Can I let go of my agenda and my investment in outward religious practices? Can I empty myself of certitudes, and pat formularies, and thus open myself to the mystery of grace? The choice is yours - for the moment – in the end, life yields to bodily death and our emptying is done for us. This is the harsh reality that we all will ultimately face; thank goodness that we have a merciful Father – a Father of second chances.