

Do-overs—God’s Specialty! Message for October 1, 2017 *Based on Matthew 21. 23-32*

Our gospel story for today starts with Jesus in the great temple of Jerusalem, where he was teaching. And the chief priests and the elders of the people ask him by what authority is he doing all these things. All what things? Well, just the day before, the people were celebrating Jesus’ coming to Jerusalem. He came into the city on a donkey, and an impromptu parade breaks out -- almost like a flash mob--as people put down their coats along the path, wave palm branches and they hail him as the Son of David. We now call this day Palm Sunday. And then Jesus comes to the Temple and sees the marketplace that has become such a big part of temple life. This marketplace did support the peoples and the Temple needs to some degree, as animals for sacrifices were sold, Roman and other foreign coin was exchanged for Temple currency. Other sideline businesses sprang up as well, and the Temple got a percentage of all the business proceeds, so business was not just tolerated by the Temple authorities, but encouraged. What does Jesus do? Remember this story? He overturns the sellers’ tables. The house of God was no longer a place of worship but of business, and dishonest business at that. He was very clearly making a statement! You can imagine that wasn’t a popular move among the business people or the temple leadership! Then Jesus spends the rest of that day at the temple healing people. And the next day he returns and is now actually teaching in the Jerusalem Temple. First he’s paraded into town, hailed as a hero, as the Son of the great King David, next he turns the Temple market to shambles, then he’s healing people, and now he’s teaching people about God in the Great Temple of Jerusalem!?

So the temple authorities, the chief priests and elders of the congregation come to him and say “By what authority are you doing all these things, and who gave you the authority to even do them?” And you know, given the situation of the previous day, it’s not such a ridiculous question. After all, they were within their rights to ask. They had the authority, given them through their long held religious laws passed down since the time of Moses. It might be a bit like if Billy Graham decided to come into this church, completely rearrange things in the church as he saw fit, hold a healing service and then decided do some preaching right here in the church! And you can bet that the wardens and I would have some questions for him too!

So here was this was country bumpkin upstart of a rabbi, questioning long held traditions and ways of doing things, he was creating a ruckus, disrupting many lives, disrupting the business of the temple, teaching and healing, drawing people to his message, and he was challenging the recognized authorities. Who does he think he is anyway? But -- they had to tread carefully, he had many followers, he was getting to be popular among the people, they couldn’t afford to start a riot nor did they need to start what could be a dangerous split among the people.

And Jesus, being Jesus knows darn well what they’re asking, where they’re coming from and will not be drawn into their argument. So he responds to them in classic rabbinical style, answering their question with a question¹ that challenges them. “Did John’s authority to baptize come from heaven, or was it merely human?” Don’t you just hate it when people answer your question with a question? The leaders discuss it among themselves: “If we say it was from heaven, he will ask us why we didn’t believe John. But if we say it was merely human, we’ll be mobbed because the people believe John was a prophet.” (*Matt 21.25-16 NLT*)

So they refuse to answer his question, and Jesus refuses to answer theirs. Why would Jesus respond to their question with a reference to John the Baptist? He was aligning himself with John’s message. John came in the style of the prophets of old, the prophets of their Hebrew Scriptures. John came to the people with a message of repentance -- turn back to God and ask for forgiveness of your sins. John’s calling was to baptize Jesus, and in that baptism he announced the Messiah, the saviour of the people of Israel. John and his message was what tied Jesus to the history of the Hebrew people, through their scriptures, to their God, the God of Abraham and Jacob and Moses. And these religious leaders

¹ Lewis R. Donelson, Exegetical Perspective for Matthew 21. 23-32 in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4 p. 117*

would have none of it! To agree with any of this would disrupt the way of life of Temple, question their authority as the ones in charge, and question how things had been done for generations.²

Jesus was challenging the authority of those in power--the chief priests and the lay people who ran the Temple, forcing them to look at the source of their authority, and how they behaved and chose to use – well really, misuse their authority. However,

(i)t is easy for us to judge the chief priests and the elders, because we already know the story... What if we were to put ourselves into the shoes of the chief priests and elders? What if we were to ask about our own tendency to want to keep things as they are, to maintain the status quo? What if we were to ask ourselves about our own resistance to change, to being transformed? What is Jesus asking of us as we so easily ridicule these keepers of the religious establishments?³

What Jesus was asking was ‘Where was God in all of that?’ Were decision on how the temple was run made based on the way of God, or on the will of the leaders to serve their own desires and interests? Whose will was really being served?

So Jesus tells them a story about a man with two sons, whom he directs to go to work in his vineyard. The first son tells his dad that he doesn’t want to, but later changes his mind and goes to work anyway. The second son says “Sure Dad, I’ll get right on that”, but doesn’t even bother to go to the vineyard.

So Jesus asks the chief priests and elders, what do you think of that? Which of those sons did the will of the father? Well, that’s a no-brainer! Obviously the first one, the son who had a change of heart, changed his mind and went to the vineyard to work anyway. This “confirms what all of Jewish tradition teaches. This is standard Jewish theology.”⁴

Then Jesus takes his story one step further: “I tell you the truth, corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you do. ³² For John the Baptist came and showed you the right way to live, but you didn’t believe him, while tax collectors and prostitutes did. And even when you saw this happening, you refused to believe him and repent of your sins.” (*Matt 21. 31-32 NLT*)

What’s Jesus saying here? Well, he’s calling the church leadership out as hypocrites to be sure. John the Baptist, clearly one of God’s prophets, came and showed them the right way, and they chose to ignore it, refused to recognize John’s authority as coming from God, instead choosing to continue living for themselves, and revelling in their own sense of power. But those in the lowest rungs of Jewish society, prostitutes and tax collectors, they got John’s message of repentance and forgiveness. They had no illusions about themselves, had no sense of superiority, accepted that they were sinners that they had lost touch with God in their lives and came to God for forgiveness. They had a turn of heart and changed their way of life and came to God. So, Jesus says, these so-called sinners, the ones you look down on, they will see the Kingdom of God before you rich and powerful leaders will.

The leaders were living lives as hypocrites, not being true to the laws of Moses, living a “Do as I say, not as I do.” lifestyle, and protecting themselves using the power of their office, and lining their pockets too. And Jesus is asking them, challenging them on this. It’s like he saying: Who among you is really walking the talk, the church leaders or the so-called sinners?

² Ibid

³ Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, Pastoral Perspective for Matthew 21. 23-32 in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4 p. 118

⁴ Donelson, p 119

This is a good parable to help us to consider within ourselves—what authority guides the decisions I make in my life? How and on what basis do I make decisions that affect the way I live my life, decisions that affect not just me, but those around me, my family, my friends, my fellow parishioners, my community? What's really in my heart? Am I walking the talk, am I being true to the faith, the ways of God, the way of Christ? And I think we can all say, if we're truthful, not always. That's the message of repentance, the awareness and a change of heart, a change of mind and a change of ways. And asking God to forgive us, knowing that we will be forgiven if we truly repent—like those tax collectors and prostitutes Jesus did. They knew they'd messed up and wanted a change of heart, and wanted to start over. We have a loving saviour who wants nothing more than that for us too! After all, do-over's are God's specialty!

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