

Sermon
Matthew 21:23-32
17th Sunday after Pentecost • Sunday, September 27, 2020
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

At first, it seems that the two parts of our gospel text for today are totally unrelated.

First, there is the talk of authority and later, a parable on integrity.

How many of you remember when you were a kid and your parents telling you, "do what I say, not what I do!" Back then *you* didn't have *any* authority, and your parents, in uttering this phrase, were at least a little lacking in integrity.

In the story just before today's reading from Matthew, Jesus had entered Jerusalem in triumph. When he went to the Temple, he was enraged at what he found there. There were moneychangers, grifters, those exploiting the faithful, and those selling animals to be sacrificed. So, in a fit of righteous anger, Jesus turned their tables upside down...And in today's story, we find Jesus again outside the Temple, and the authorities are still pretty upset with him.

You might imagine the motives of the chief priests and the elders when they asked Jesus a trick question about his authority - they had hoped to make a fool out of him. Because, you know, he'd just messed with their things.

But the problem was that their question to Jesus became a boomerang, a sort of reflective mirror, because he met their challenging question with a question of his own.

When Jesus asked them *his* question, it was clear that whichever way that they answered, it was a sure thing that they would end up incriminating themselves. Well played, Jesus. You've just won round one...you may move on to the next challenge.

But no matter how fancy you dress it up, whether you wear the Pharisee's ornate garment and headdress, the hunger for human authority always boils down to a desire for power.

If you have enough people behind you, or guns with you - or both - you have power, and then what you say goes, period. Divine authority, on the other hand, has to do with truth, the truth of God, the truth about who God made us to be.

In the short run, human authority can appear to overwhelm divine authority—even to crucify it—but, we know that ultimately, God's truth, God's authority prevails.

In response to Jesus' question about how John the Baptist just so happened to have Divine authority, the chief priest and the elders answered with a resounding, "We do not know." For them to refuse to answer doesn't only display ignorance but deliberate defiance - of Jesus. In refusing to say that John's ministry comes from God, they reject the claim that John and Jesus have God-

given authority. To refuse this recognition, to refuse to make a choice, is to reveal their own illegitimacy. They have no real authority.

It reminds me of the words to the popular 1980 song, *Freewill* from the progressive rock band, Rush. (Oh my, was that really 40 years ago?)
 "If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice.

Making choices. It would seem that our gospel text is about reconciling our actions and our words. Both communicate to others on which side of the fence we stand – obedience or rebellion.

And then Jesus tells a parable of two sons. On one level, this story emphasizes that deeds are more important than words, and just how well our words match our actions when it comes to obeying the will of God. When Jesus speaks with the elite in the synagogue, he's addressing the tension that was already present. In the synagogue there were the people who had said "Yes" to God, but who had failed to go and do God's work. Those people were not doing God's will. So this parable becomes a warning that the church, those who are now the "Yes" people, who have said "Yes" to the Messiah, those who may very well say the right words, but fail to act on them.

If we had to make a choice about which son did his father's will, I think we would all choose the second son – the one who originally said "no" to his father, but eventually did what he had been asked to do.

But still, there is another explanation.

Author Bernard Brandon Scott writes in his book, *Hear Then the Parable*, that both sons are wrong. Scott writes about honoring the father. A son who publicly says "no" to his father is shaming his father. Hmm? Wouldn't that have also been true of you, all those years ago, if you had pointed out your parent's lack of integrity when they uttered, "do what I say, not what I do?"

When the parable hearer is asked to choose between the two sons, a dilemma arises. Both sons have insulted the father, one by saying no, the other by saying yes but doing nothing. So, one son honors his father by going into the vineyard and upholding family solidarity, while the other maintains the family's good name by appearing on the surface to be a good son. **Would the father choose to be publicly honored and privately shamed, or publicly shamed and privately honored?** In the first century, that is not much of a choice.
The real question is which son would make the father most angry?
 The listener now must choose.

It would seem that this parable is about choosing to change ourselves and our lives to do the will of God.

We might conclude that the religious leaders in the temple “would not change their hearts.” I’m not sure *what* would have brought about a change in the lives of the Pharisees that would lead to their understanding Jesus’ authority. Still, that doesn’t exclude us from having to change.

On the other hand, in this text we see the change in the lives of tax collectors and prostitutes. I’m not always sure we believe that God can “turn around” the lives of “those people.” Today we might imagine Jesus talking about murderers and drug dealers. We tend to approach such dramatic conversions with a lot of skepticism. Could that also imply that we are likely to close ourselves off from the transforming power of God to make changes in our own lives? Or are we so content with our relatively comfortable lives that we don’t want God coming and messing them up by calling us to new and different concerns to care about. Could it also be that we don’t want God messing up our church, by having such people come into our comfortable fellowship? I mean, really, who might come if we flew a Pride flag?

I also wonder how many of us, if we met someone in our church who was a former prostitute or thief or drug addict, would we have the courage to ask that person to talk about the transformation that God had meant in their lives? Would that person be willing to reveal his past? Would she still be accepted by others if such pasts were known?

We need to keep in mind that such testimonies are not really about “me and my sinfulness,” but about the powerful grace and love of God that can change people. I’m certain that there are people in nearly every congregation who have had powerful, life-changing, God experiences.

Would they be willing to share their stories? Would we believe them? Would we even bother to ask?

The primary point of this parable, I think, is about having a sincere change of heart, not just about saying or doing the right things.

Another comparison we might see is between those who attend church and say all the right words, but whose lives fall somewhat short of John the Baptist’s “way of righteousness.” Others may live exemplary lives but who do not want anything to do with “organized religion” or a public expression of their faith. Perhaps both need “a change of heart”. Perhaps we all do.

Many people, like the religious leaders in the first part of our text, are unwilling to make a decision about who is the authority in their lives, but by not answering, by not deciding, they have, of course, already decided.

In 1980, the rock group, Rush, sang
 “If you chose not to decide, you still have made a choice.”
 The chorus went like this:

"You can choose a ready guide in some celestial voice
If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice
You can choose from phantom fears and kindness that can kill
I will choose a path that's clear. I will choose freewill."

Just to be clear, we all make conscious choices every day.
Let us have the **courage** to speak of God's incredible force in our own lives -
and with our celebrated free will, let us **choose** to serve God...
...first.

Amen