

## Sermon

September 27, 2020

Matthew 21: 23-32

As I sat down to create this sermon the themes just kept rolling around in my head, sometimes really connected to each other and sometimes I just couldn't bring them together. On the surface it seems the reading from Matthew is about authority and who gets to go to heaven. But no, that's not it. In my wrestling with it the bottom line, it seems to me is that it is God who keeps showing up in our lives with love, compassion and patience no matter what. Through the life of Jesus we see and hear the authority of his words and actions and we are called, every moment, to follow. And when we stumble, say we will and we don't, miss the mark, can't because something else has come up – we are still called to the table, to be fed and nourished to go out again to do the work God calls us to.

In the reading from Matthew, Jesus is in the Temple and his presence there is challenged by the chief priests and elders. The authorities try to trick Jesus, by questioning, to discredit him, to get him out of "their" space, but Jesus doesn't comply and backs them into a corner. He will answer their question on where his authority comes from once they've answered his question. "Is John's baptism divine or human?" Either answer will trip the up them. If they say it is of divine origin, then why didn't they believe him and follow John? If it was of human origin the crowds would be against them as they truly believed John as a prophet. What a conundrum for the chief priests and elders. They have no answer to give. Jesus' stays in the Temple.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the two sons who are asked by their father to go into the vineyard to get some work done. After breakfast one fall morning, dad, aware that the work of the harvest is coming soon and there is much to do asks his eldest son to attend to the chores. The first son says, "Nope, can't today dad", thinking, there must be something better to do today, maybe a bit of off-roading with a buddy. When asked, son number two is quick to say, "Sure dad, I'll get right on it." Dad just shaking his head but loving his boys, checks out the weather on his smartphone, as they head out the door. The older boy, however, changes his mind; niggling guilt, or his buddy couldn't go out today or, perhaps, the satisfaction of getting a job done? The son who said he'd go, well, he didn't. Was there a shiny bauble that got his time and attention or was last night's party still reverberating uncomfortably in his head? So who, asks Jesus, again testing, did what the father asked? And the chief priests and elders got it right in one, "the first son", they said, without hesitation. That wasn't so hard was it? "Why couldn't they see themselves in the parable?" Jesus must have thought. You can't just give lip service to what God demands of us, it needs to be lived. But the Temple leaders' authority and privilege was bestowed on them by the Roman rule of the day. Their loss would be too great to follow John and Jesus, to actually do the work that God asks. The great words of their tradition were sufficient and controlling the Temple to their benefit seemed to work. Fulfilling the message of those words in action was to lose the privilege and power that was so comfortable. Jesus will continue to tell the stories and they will eventually they will "get it", they won't like what that means, and ultimately Jesus is arrested and killed. But that's getting ahead of today's story.

Stanley Saunders says it this way; “The distinction between the two brothers turns on action versus word. Jesus and his adversaries agree that only one son does the will of the father, the son who says “no,” but goes nonetheless into the vineyard to work. Actions speak louder than words. Jesus uses this exchange to expose what the leaders really thought about John. The chief priests’ and elders’ failure to believe and respond to John reveals the truth about where they stood, and thus which brother they actually represent. Jesus’ authority, in contrast, is affirmed by the integrity of his words and actions, as well as by its outcomes: gathering and restoration, healing and cleansing, release from demonic powers, restored sight, table fellowship with sinners, and preservation of the least ones -- all examples of the “fruit” of repentance.”

This isn’t the first time that the chief priests and elders have heard this kind of story either. Israel’s tradition is rich with the stories of the sons who followed God’s command and those that didn’t; Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. No excuses, they knew well enough. But the story needs to be told again and again. It is God’s immeasurable patient way with us.

Grace comes in the never ending opportunity to return again to be at the table, to hear the beckoning of God’s word and living into it. Let’s carry the parable just a bit further.

Suppose these two brothers have a little sister. She’s a bit of a pain but really, pretty smart and loves her folks and totally adores her big brothers. She happily does what mom and dad ask, she doesn’t make promises she can’t keep, and she certainly isn’t “brown-nosing”, trying to “one –up” her brothers. She really messes up sometimes, true enough, but she doesn’t try to cover it up. At mealtimes you can count on her to show up, sometimes grumpy or angry, contrite, sad or even delightfully happy. She chatters away, talks about her day and asks endless questions. My goodness, mom and dad are so patient, they get that she and her brothers are less than perfect. But they’re always there for them and the food is good.

Those bottom of society n’er- do-wells, the tax collectors who collected money for the Roman oppressors and the prostitutes who have sold their bodies, the temples of God, on the street for money listened to the prophet John. They have heard and seen Jesus, found healing and acceptance, and have followed him in the streets of their neighbourhoods. The real, life giving power lay in the word and action of compassion, healing, non-judgment and acceptance. Now in turn, they can live their lives into that gift and grace that they have experienced.

In 2001 I had finished my Master of Divinity degree and the process for becoming ordained in the Lutheran church. While waiting for a call I applied to volunteer more regularly at Winnipeg Harvest in Winnipeg. We had volunteered there as a family and as a church community for a couple years previously. Within a few weeks of my volunteerism an opportunity for employment came up and I decided to apply and consequently got the job of Agency Liaison.

Winnipeg Harvest like food banks large and small across Canada is highly dependant on volunteers. Retired folks, students, mentally or physically challenged people, the unemployed and the unemployable, newcomers to Canada and indigenous people, those from the suburbs and others hardened by life on Winnipeg’s inner city streets and North End.

We didn't have a staff room but a common gathering place where volunteers and staff alike gathered for lunch. Three times a week the meal was made by two sisters who volunteered and were very skilled with the microwave and an electric skillet or two. They made our meals from whatever happened to be on hand in the warehouse or large walk-in refrigerators. One day I went to lunch looking forward to whatever Michelle and Linda had prepared. The lunch room was full, and there was lots of chatter and laughter. I sat down next to a rather rough looking character I hadn't met before, he didn't smell too good either, but he had tucked into the food in front of him and was chatting with the others at the table. At some point, I wasn't really following the conversation, he said, "I can tell you how to commit the perfect murder!" That caught my attention! I mentally shook my head. How was it that he and I were sitting here together – how extremely different our lives were, and yet we both had a place at that table and in that community. We both, in our own ways experienced the generosity of Michelle and Linda, and the safety and grace in that place and moment.

Children of God we all are, sons and daughters who often don't get it. We are continuously swept away by the various "authorities" of the day, shiny baubles that will make us happy, distractions, adventures and powers that will give us an edge over others. We say we will and we don't, we do it and mess up. God calls us to turn again, to repent, to be fed and nourished, to listen to the Word of God and go out again into the vineyard and live that Word. And then....come back to the table again.

Amen

In the summer of 1977 I worked at a large Lutheran Camp in the middle of Minnesota, the heart of Scandinavian Lutheranism in the States. We were a staff of more than thirty college students recruited from the various church and secular schools in the area. The first week at camp was orientation, to everything that we would be doing with campers over the course of the summer; from waterfront schedules and kitchen duties, to learning the bible studies, devotions and worship around evening campfires. The campers were from grade 4 through high school, from all kinds of households and families. The Dean of the camp was an experienced camp director and had previously been a Lutheran pastor. He was knowledgeable, fun, a good leader and a good teacher. One evening when we were gathered around the campfire he talked to us about the kinds of kids that we would be working with. Of course there would be those that had come to camp before, those that would easily adapt and

participate in the activities, but there would also be those who didn't want to be there, dropped off by parents who were more interested in having time without kids than helping their child have a meaningful experience. Some campers would hang on every word their counselor said ..... and literally hang on us.... others would be remote and hard to reach, others just would just rebel and find it difficult to participate. In the context of learning about the biblical theme and messages for the summer, the Dean said one thing that has stuck with me my whole life. "What you say and do may be a life changing experience for these kids; maybe not this week or next month, maybe ten years from now. They may not remember your face or your name but they will remember how you made them feel."

What authority we were given! It was not mine or the Deans but the authority that is of God as we experience in the message and actions of Jesus – the Jesus we encounter in today's gospel in Matthew. As we have been