

SLD09.28.08 26th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 21:23-32
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“Let’s Get Going!”

I mentioned last Sunday that we’d be hearing a lot from Jesus these days. Not that we don’t usually, in one way or another. But these lectionary Sundays here of late present Jesus at his most direct, his most pointed, his most challenging, his most uncompromising. Sometimes, I confess, I prefer hearing *about* Jesus than *from* him, he’s such a preachy sort of guy. But before he is a preacher, Jesus is a teacher so he tends to use stories, parables, rather unsubtle object lessons, to get his invariably preachy but often regrettably *unpastoral* points across.

A couple weeks ago, we learned through the story of the unforgiving servant that there’s no limit to how much or how often you and I are meant to work on the process of forgiving from our hearts, regardless of who’s “right,” or how long it takes. Last week, with the story of the laborers in the vineyard who got paid the same amount no matter how much they worked, Jesus told us to get over our bad selves with regard to us or others getting what we want or feel we deserve. Bad news is, we don’t *deserve* squat. The good news - God’s always generous.

This week it’s the parable of the two sons – not the prodigal son and his understandably outraged big brother, but two ordinary fellows whom their father ask to go work in the vineyard. One says “no” but goes later. The other says “okay” but never shows. And Jesus wants to know which one did the will of the father. Duh, right? But don’t kid yourself; Jesus has always got layers and layers going on in his stories. More than I can uncover in a lifetime, anyway.

For example, you gotta know whom Jesus is talking to when he tells his stories, and who's sort of listening in. Last couple weeks Jesus has mostly been talking to his disciples, the ones who supposedly know him, maybe understand him, and usually give him the benefit of the doubt, at least to start with. But today he's addressing a different crowd - the chief priests and elders of the temple – with his disciples sort of standing by and listening in.

Now, not only do the chief priests and elders of the temple *not* follow Jesus, they pretty much wish he'd just get lost. He challenges their authority, he disrupts the status quo, and equally annoying, even frightening, by talking too loud and brashly, and getting the people riled up, he's making trouble with the Romans. The Jewish community can't afford that – key to the fragile Pax Romana, the tentative peace currently enjoyed by the Jews, is cooperation, containment, and keeping a low profile. And this Jesus keeps stirring things up and upsetting the balance, going around acting like the king of everything, healing people, blessing kids, wreaking havoc in the temple economy and de-leafing fig trees...why, enough is enough.

And since they can't seem to get rid of the guy (yet), the temple authorities decide to confront Jesus on their own turf, so to speak. The temple, after all, *is* the priests' turf, right? And here's Jesus squatting on *their* turf teaching *their* torah. Why, time to ask him straight out just who he thinks he is. By whose authority is he doing these things? That'll show him. Everybody knows who's *really* in charge in the temple. So where do you get off, Jesus, acting all holier-than-thou in our territory, huh? Answer us *that*, why don't ya'.

To which Jesus replies – now remember, all these followers and questioners are standing around listening in – and Jesus says, “Allow me respond to your question with another question: Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

Huh?

Now, sometimes people answer a question with another question to get more information - for example, if you ask "Are you going?," the other person might ask "Am I going where?" Then there are those who forever answer a question with a question reflexively, either to *avoid* giving out any information, or simply to be annoying.¹ But in the Hebrew tradition, there's this millennia-honored style of Talmudic scholarship in which vectors of inquiry (that's what I'm calling a question, or a line of questioning) in which vectors of inquiry frequently lead not to final answers but to further vectors of inquiry. In this tradition it's common to answer a question with question not to *avoid* answering so much as to further, deepen, or shift, the debate.² Still, it can also be a device, a parry, a “back at ya’,” of which I fully believe Jesus is capable.

“By whose authority do you do what you do, Jesus?”

“By whose authority did John the Baptist do what he did?”

Now the onus is on the chief priests and elders. How will they answer? It's a tough question, even a trick question, for Jesus' adversaries. Remember, a lot of people are listening to hear how they respond. A lot of people who like John. A lot of people who followed him. Who were pretty convinced that John was a prophet of God.

By whose authority did John do what he did?

¹ http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Is_there_a_special_name_for_answering_a_question_with_another_question

² <http://stuffjewishpeoplelike.wordpress.com/2008/04/06/answering-a-question-with-another-question/>

If the temple authorities say John's baptism came from heaven, Jesus will ask them, so why hadn't they believed him? But if they say John's baptism was of *human* origin, then the crowd's going to get really angry.

Like a master chess player cornering a king with a sly pawn, Jesus has put his adversaries in a bit of a bind. A "catch-22," if you will.

Remember Joseph Heller's mid-20th century novel by the same name? In Heller's novel, the catch 22 referred to the inescapable conundrum in which Air Force pilot Orr found himself in which, whether he proved himself sane or *insane*, there was no avoiding his being sent out on dangerous combat missions. Since Heller's novel, a catch-22 has come to mean a contradictory or self-defeating course of action, a tricky or disadvantageous condition, "damned if you do and damned if you don't," "heads I win, tails you lose" sort of scenario.³ Ever been in one of those?

Well, that's where Jesus put the chief priests at the moment – and I think he knew what he was doing. Best they can come up with under the circumstances is a weak, "We don't know." That Jesus is a clever guy.

But, you know how he's been doing here of late: just in case anybody might have possibly missed his point, Jesus presses it even further into the heart with a parable. *Three* parables, matter of fact, so *nobody* can walk away from that Saturday School empty-headed about who's in charge, and with whom God plans to populate the Kingdom in the here and hereafter.

A man has two sons, says Jesus. They're both teenagers. They say what they feel like. They do what they feel like. They drive their parents crazy.

³ <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/catch-22.html>

The man tells both his sons to go work in the vineyard. (I'm thinking, "good luck.") One says no, but what do you know, ends up *feeling* like going later. The other says "sure," (anything to get his dad off his back) but never feels like going, so doesn't. So in the end, Jesus asks, which one ends up doing the will of the father?

Such a simple question, it's got to be a set-up. It is. Still, the crowd's waiting and the priests have to answer. "The first son," they answer begrudgingly. "Even if he were disobedient in the beginning, the first son ends up doing the will of the father."

"Truly I tell you," says Jesus – the chief priests' cue they're not going to like whatever he's fixin' to say – "truly I tell you, the scum and dross of society, the tax collectors, prostitutes and annoying teenagers are going into God's kingdom ahead of you," says Jesus.

Which, of course, gives you, and them, and the crowd of Jesus' followers listening in, a pretty clear idea about where Jesus ranks the temple authorities. The people you hold in the worst contempt, the ones who gross you out the most, everybody you think barely has a right to live, they're heading through the pearly gates in front of me and you.

I hate that. The chief priests and elders hated that. Even the Jesus' followers listening in weren't too wild about it. I'm telling you, this Jesus of the parables is not a pleasant guy. But he *is* a practical one. Eminently practical.

Never mind what anybody says, or what they *used* to do. Never mind our spotty past or our fancy resumes, our hidden secrets or our spiritual practices, our wicked past or our vows to be better; Jesus isn't interested in what we say or what we've done, for

better or for worse; he's interested in what we *do*. Or even more importantly, what we're *about* to do. What we *will* do.

Like Amos the prophet, Jesus says to the holier-than-thou-priests and elders, "I hate, I despise your solemn assemblies!" I'm not impressed with your saying holy stuff all the time or going through holy motions. If you're not following through with action, with transformation, with growth and change and becoming; if you're not deepening your faith, and cultivating your love, and seriously trying to integrate and live into what you keep flapping your lips about, I don't have any time for you.

I'm talking the tax collectors and prostitutes sold their souls and their bodies – how much lower can you go? But when they heard the Baptist, says Jesus, they *got* it. Do you get it? The ones who sold out started buying back in, started changing their lives, or trying to, anyway. First they said, "no." Their *lives* said "no." But then something happened, something that the Holy Spirit, first through John, then through Jesus, then through you and me, made happen, that...slowly...insidiously...unstoppably...and certainly surprisingly...morphed that "no" into a "yes," until those reprobates actually *felt* like going to work in the vineyard. On their own volition. And then they did! They *went* to work in the vineyard and the work was sweet, surprisingly sweet, and satisfying.

Which means?

Hey, I don't want to identify with the chief priests and elders! They seem to be the bad guys. Let's you and I stand with the Jesus' followers who trust him but are trying to figure out what the heck he means. But I get to spend all week wondering, so

here's what I think: are you ready? God doesn't care where we are; God cares where we're going. That's what I think.

The priests and elders Jesus is talking to, they're stuck. They aren't going anywhere. Now, mind you, there were probably some tax collectors and prostitutes back then who aren't going anywhere, too. But Jesus is talking up the ones that *are* going somewhere. The tax collectors and prostitutes and chief priests and elders and annoying teenagers and anybody else listening in, who *are* moving, and growing, pressing against some growing edges. The sinners and the reprobates and the ordinary schlepps who *are* awake. Alert. Paying attention to God's "come hither" and *acting* on it. Or even just *wanting* to act on it. Some times, for some of us, that's as good as it gets. And, Jesus is saying, it's good enough.

God doesn't care where we are; God cares where we're heading.

I find hope in that assertion, that no matter how stuck we are in our mindsets, our habits, our relationships, our addictions, it's not where we *are* but where we're going that matters to God. As though the present, no matter how all-consuming, doesn't define us, doesn't limit us, doesn't condemn us, not as far as God's concerned.

Tax collectors, prostitutes, annoying teenagers, impatient young women, jaded middle-aged folk, disappointed old people, testosterone-blinded men of any age, CEOs of financial corporations, scared politicians – whoever, whatever you are, is not so important to God as who you could be. Maybe even who you are, at least in God's imagination.

For, I believe, God sees Christ in us. And sees when we see it, too. And celebrates that. You and I, we are not Christ but Christ is in us, every one of us, ever

beckoning us closer to him, to the healing and the wholeness and the goodness and the kindness and the abundance of his Kingdom. It's one of the things I like best about this church, how I keep seeing Christ peeking, shining, through each one of you. I mean, sometimes I don't – seriously don't – we all have our blackout moments. But a lot of the time, don't you find yourself seeing with God's eyes the risen Christ in you and me and others around you?

The way I figure, it doesn't matter so much who we *are* – new Christian, mature Christian, new sinner, seasoned sinner, churched, unchurched, lover of God or total reprobate – to God, the God of hope, the God of possibilities, the God of tax collectors and prostitutes, it matters a whole lot more where we're going.

So I say, you and I, let's get going.

To the glory of God. Amen.