

SLD010.16.11 17th Sunday after Pentecost
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 21:23-32
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Where We’re Heading”

So, what do you think, Yubi? Which of the two sons does the will of the father? The one who says he won’t go work in his father’s vineyard but changes his mind and goes later? Or the one who says, “Sure, I’ll go,” but never actually shows up?

Right. Because actions speak louder than words, don’t they. We all know about that. We can flap our lips all we want but in the end, what really matters is what we do about it, right? How we behave. The choices we make. The actions we take.

It’s not that Jesus doesn’t care what we say. Remember he was the one who said “It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out of it.” (Mt. 15:11) It’s just that saying a thing doesn’t necessarily make it so. We all know that.

Back when I was in high school, making out was the big thing. Oh, those innocent days! And the guys would do just about anything to get you to make out with them. There was this one guy, Rick, who was known all among us girls for carrying on as soon as he got his first kiss by saying “I love you, I love you, I love you!,” which just made most of us laugh. We all know that saying a thing doesn’t necessarily make it so.

On the other hand, the Scribes and Pharisees Jesus is talking to in today’s text are all about saying things, especially things other people ought to do. Well aware of the power of their position, they used words to interpret the law of Moses to keep everybody straight. Except maybe themselves. Only a lot of the time, themselves, too,

because they really are all about the law, using their knowledge of it like hammers, and their words, like sharp nails that pin the people to their guilt and make them squirm.

Only the things is, there's the letter of the law, and then there's the spirit of it, and as far as Jesus could see, the two didn't always go together. The law dictates people's behavior but what Jesus is forever looking for is a change of heart

"You hypocrites!" Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees. "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you that

This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine. (Mt. 15:8-9, Is. ___)

God's prophets and God's friends have never had any more time than God does for lip-service that doesn't issue in a change of heart, and right action.

Remember God roaring at the Israelites through the prophet Amos how

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

God never has had time for empty words or empty action, either one. Nor patience for a body who says one thing and does another. Because words aren't enough for God. Truth be told, action isn't, either, unless it issues from the heart. What God wants is our *whole* selves, our minds, hearts, souls, hands, lined up with what we do and how we are in the world. The only reason actions speak louder than words is that there's usually more of our selves in them. And that's what God really after, our *whole* selves aligned with the divine will. God's interested in the rubber and the road and where "the rubber hits the road." God wants the whole megillah.

You know what a “megillah” is? In Judaism, the “megillah” refers to the scroll that contains the biblical narrative of the Book of Esther, which is traditionally read in synagogues to celebrate the festival of Purim. It’s a long and sort of complicated story so “megillah” has come to mean any tediously detailed or embroidered account,¹ like, say, if someone were to tell the whole story of all ins and outs and ups and downs of their lives from the very beginning. God wants the whole megillah of “us” aligned with the divine will. Words are simply not enough.

“Sure, Dad, I’ll go work in the vineyard today.” I’ll show up for worship, and seek ways to serve you, and tend to my personal faith development, and place you smack in the center of my life...and then blow it off? Uh uh, says Jesus to the Pharisees, to his disciples, to us, God’s not going for it.

‘Cause you know we’re all being addressed in this, and all, Jesus’parable – the people he’s talking to (the scribes and Pharisees) but also the people listening in – his disciples, the crowd, you and I. That Jesus is aware of who all is listening to his challenging tale is a pretty safe assumption. The Pharisees wished to put Jesus on the spot in front of everybody. Jesus shifts the attack into a teaching moment, which no doubt irks the Pharisees even more.

‘By what and whose authority do you do these things,” they want to know. Here of late in Matthew, “these things” have included telling these suspiciously piercing simple stories, interpreting the Torah, gallivanting into Jerusalem amid hosannas and cheers, overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple, and flinging a withering curse at a fig tree for not supplying him breakfast, and now one-upping the temple authorities on their own turf.

¹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/whole+megillah>

By what and whose authority do you do these things? They want to know.

Jesus answers with another question; “By whose authority did John the Baptist do what he did?” Heavenly or human?

Well, *listening in* on the conversation, as Jesus knows, as the Pharisees know, is a crowd of folks who happen to think pretty highly of the Baptist. Which puts the Pharisees in a bit of a bind, you see, because if they say the Baptist’s authority was from heaven, Jesus will ask why they didn’t believe him when he said the Messiah was coming and Jesus is the One. On the other hand, if they say that the Baptist’s authority was of human origin, the crowd will get mad at them because they regarded John as a prophet of God.

And what do you do when you’re cornered but don’t want to admit fault? Those of us who remember the Watergate trials might recall. You pull a “nolo contendere,” a position in a criminal proceeding in which the defendant neither accepts nor denies responsibility for the, in this case, implied, charges.²

“We do not know from whence came the Baptist’s authority,” answer the Pharisees. “Well then,” replies Jesus, “I’m not going to tell you by whose authority I do what I do, either.”

And then, as if to call the Pharisees out for trying to trap him with words, Jesus tells the story of the two sons. And what we learn from the story is that it isn’t the sons’ words that are important, it’s what they do, the choices they make, the actions they take, the way they line up their lives with what the father wants of them.

Only, just in case the scribes and Pharisee may not be getting the point, Jesus goes on: “Truly I tell you,” he says. You gotta look out when Jesus says “truly I tell you”

² http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/nolo_contendere

because you know he's not going to pull any punches. "Truly I tell you," he says to the scribes and Pharisees, "the scumbags of society are getting to the kingdom before you guys are! Because unlike you, they 'got' John when he was around. Even when you saw them getting him and changing their lives, you *still* didn't get him. Just like you're not getting me, pals."

The crowds listening. The disciples are listening. You and I are listening. And feeling pretty smug, right, because *we* certainly get Jesus, right?

Well, not his first disciples, anyway. Jesus' first disciples are often every bit as clueless as anybody else in the story about what Jesus is up to. Quite often they don't actually understand, or like, any more than the Pharisees do Jesus' puzzling preference for the least, the last and the lost. "Don't talk to *her*, Jesus." "Don't eat with *him*." "Don't let *them* bother you." "Don't touch *them*, Jesus."

No, I imagine Jesus is talking as much to those who follow him as to those who don't.

But letting everyone know what's expected of them – a life aligned with God - is not Jesus' only message in this story.

Something I noticed for the first time in this passage this go around is that is that Jesus doesn't actually *exclude* the scribes and Pharisees from the kingdom of heaven. He never says they *can't* get there; he just says the bottom feeders are getting there first. They may not like that, confident as they are status among the righteous, but even for them Jesus is not describing a hopeless situation.

It's more like Jesus is saying to the temple authorities, "The kingdom of heaven awaits you but you are SO off track, all the redeemed scumbags are going to get there ahead of you! But...I hear in the implied thought, you *can*, even you *will*, get there."

You know, personally I'm not all that down on prostitutes and tax collectors, but scribes and Pharisees...if God's kingdom awaits even *them*....

And by God's kingdom I don't mean some pristine angel-studded paradise; I mean that alignment we were talking about earlier, that lining up of our whole selves with the will of God to where what comes out of our mouths jives with what beats in our hearts, which harmonizes with who and how we are in the world. That, I think, is the kingdom of God among us. And that alignment awaits even the Pharisees...? Now *that's* grace.

In the case of the two sons, grace pops up again in the way that Jesus doesn't buy either one the way they first present. Whether they say they will or will not do as the father asks them, what seems to matter to Jesus is only what happens *next*.

No matter what anybody professes with their lips, or does in any given moment, what matters more to Jesus is what might happens *next*. The boy who says he'll go but doesn't can still change his mind and go. No matter what we've done or who or how we are, what will the scribes, the Pharisees, the disciples, you and I, do *next*? Jesus seems to be asking. As if disobedience never has the final word. As if Jesus isn't interested so much in what we say or do than in what we're *about* to do, what we *can* do, what we *will* do...next. As if God is a whole lot more interested in what's in front of us than what's behind us. As if God doesn't care so much about where we've been, or even where we are, than about where we're *heading*? As if our past and present, no matter how

consuming, does not, in God's eyes, define or limit or condemn or dismiss us from the ever-offered possibility of aligning ourselves with what God has in mind for us.

French Cuban author Anaïs Nin notes that "we don't see things as they are; we see them as *we* are." "We don't see things as they are; we see them as *we* are."

Thus is our vision limited.

God's vision, on the other hand, is not limited to seeing us as we are, but as we *might* be. Indeed, no matter how we are in any given moment, the God of hope, the God of healing, the God of kingdom possibilities, has the divine eye fixed, not on where we've been but where we're heading.

And where we're all heading, so far as I can tell from today's text, is the kingdom of God.

To the glory of God. Amen.