

Who do you think you are, Jesus? You ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, then you strut your stuff on up to the Temple and proceed to throw out everyone who had set up shop – loan sharks and bird merchants – and letting the blind and the crippled come in!

This is all outrageous behavior, even the children running and shouting through the Temple, “Hosanna to David’s Son!” What kind of nonsense is that?

Then you left town for the night! The very next day we heard it reported that as you came back into Jerusalem, you cursed a barren fig tree and it withered on the spot! What was that all about?

Who do you think you are, Jesus? Doing all these things! And now you have the audacity to come back into the Temple, teaching God knows what! “Show us your credentials. Who authorized you to teach here?”

Jesus doesn’t answer, but questions the questioners instead: “About the baptism of John – who authorized it – heaven or humans?”

That put the chief priests and elders on the spot – they argued with each other about how to answer that tricky question and there was no good option other than to concede to Jesus. “We don’t know.” Jesus said, “Then neither will I answer your question.”

You might wonder, what does John the Baptist’s baptism have to do with any of this. This was the message that John proclaimed in the wilderness: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 3:2). And lots of people from Jerusalem and all Judea were baptized in the Jordan river, as they confessed their sins. But when the religious leaders arrived on the scene, John the Baptist condemned them harshly: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance!” (Matt. 3:8)

It’s likely those chief priests and elders didn’t really think John’s baptism was from heaven, and they probably didn’t think they had anything to repent about, anyway.

Jesus decides to give them another chance for spiritual enlightenment so he tells them the parable of the two sons. “Tell me what do you think of this story,” he says: A father asks his two sons to go and do some work in the family vineyard. The first son’s answer to his father’s request was at least honest – “I will not.” He did not intend to go and work in the vineyard - but later he changed his mind. In contrast, the second son seemed obedient at first: “Yes, sir, I’ll go” – but in fact he did not go.

Which of these sons did what the father asked? The chief priests and elders answer: “The first.” Jesus said, “Yes, and I tell you that crooks and whores are going to precede you into God’s kingdom. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and whores believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn’t care enough to change and believe him” (*The Message version*).

For a long time, the religious leaders had been thinking of themselves and the whole Jewish nation as the son who was obedient to the Father. Now they hear Jesus accusing them of failing to do as they’d promised. Now they hear Jesus telling them that those who’d once refused God’s invitation – the tax collectors and the prostitutes – are now among the leading laborers in God’s kingdom.

This is an illustration of what we heard Jesus say recently at the end of his parable of the laborers in the vineyard: that the last will be first and the first will be last (Matt 20:16).

Those who were once excluded from the faith community are now lifted up by Jesus as the true believers. The religious leaders who wanted to hold onto their power, with their arrogance and their allegiance to the Roman oppressors, these are the ones who have sadly fallen away – who have withered like the fig tree that produced no fruit.

It takes humility to surrender to the authority of Jesus. This is why Jesus, again and again, points out the difficulties that some people have in entering the kingdom of God: people who are too full of themselves or too full of material wealth or possessions – who have no room left for God in their occupied lives - or who are not willing to see the needs of their neighbor or hear the cry of the oppressed.

The continuing challenge for those of us who have confessed our sins in penitence and faith is to wake each morning and say “Yes” to God: yes, we will endeavor to see and to listen and to stand up for the weak - even now during this pandemic, when we’re all struggling – even now during this time of national turmoil and division – even now as we witness injustice and violence on our tv screens virtually every night – even when we would rather go off in our own direction or just hide away from it all – the challenge we face is to keep on presenting ourselves at the vineyard – to keep giving tender, loving care, to produce the fruits of justice and mercy - and to walk humbly on the path of love. God, would you give us the strength and the courage to accept our challenge. Amen.