

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 27, 2020

The Sermon: Rev. Carol Ruthven

“Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.” Psalm 25:3-4

As I reflected on this scripture from Matthew’s Gospel, I thought to myself, “I sure wouldn’t want to be in a public argument with Jesus. I would most certainly lose.” Jesus was a formidably debater as we witness in this exchange with the chief priests of the temple and elders of the people. They were the most powerful leaders in Jerusalem and they were threatened by the popularity and growing influence of Jesus. This was the second day after Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem and he had overturned the tables of the corrupt money changers and occupied the temple.

The priestly leaders in Jerusalem ruled at the pleasure of the Rome Empire and many Israelites were questioning their legitimacy and authority. Both the chief priests and the elders of the people were wealthy elites, who controlled large parcels of land in Judea.ⁱ They had little in common with the impoverished farmers and fishermen, who had flocked to John the Baptist to be baptized and who had followed Jesus throughout his teaching and healing ministry in Galilee. It was perhaps like today where many hard-working Americans feel that they have little in common with the wealthy elites on corporate boards on Wall Street and in the halls of government, who make decisions that affect their daily lives.

The chief priests and elders were focused on two questions. By what authority had Jesus cleansed and occupied the temple and who gave him that authority? There is an old Jewish story about someone asking a rabbi, “Why do rabbis always answer a question with another question? The rabbi replied, “Why shouldn’t a rabbi answer a question with a question?”ⁱⁱ Jesus understood this well; it was a clever debating strategy. Jesus responded to the questions from the chief priests and elders by asking them, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

Jesus had them trapped. The chief priests had despised John the Baptist, who had openly criticized them. John the Baptist was hugely popular with the people, many of whom believed that John had been sent by God as a prophet. If the chief priests said that God himself had authorized John and they had publicly opposed John, then it would appear like they were opposing God. However, if they said that John had no real authority from anyone, John’s followers would be angry. Because they didn’t want to upset anyone, they played it safe and admitted to Jesus that they didn’t know the answer to his question. In a master stroke in this debate, Jesus said, “Well then I’m not going to tell you about my authority either.” Jesus knew that they were not really interested in having a serious debate. They were opposed to Jesus and wanted to undermine his authority to dislodge him from the temple.ⁱⁱⁱ

What followed was even more interesting. This was where Jesus really drove home his point. He did this by telling a parable about a father and two sons. The father asked one son to work in the vineyard and he refused. When the father left, this son felt rather badly and decided to do the work his father had requested. Meanwhile, the father

went to his other son and asked him to work. This son quickly agreed to do this; but then went off and did his own thing. Jesus asked, "Which son would you rather have? Who really did what his father wanted?"

John the Baptist's authority came from God and he told people what God wanted them to do. The people who the chief priests and elders dismissed as unworthy and not likely to be faithful to God were in fact the ones who came to John the Baptist, confessed their sins, and were baptized. In contrast, the chief priests said all the right things and appeared to be the most faithful to God, and yet they refused to confess their sins, repent, and be baptized by John the Baptist. They had turned away from God by what they did. As the old saying goes, "Actions speak louder than words."^{iv} The chief priests and elders were just like the son in the parable, who had promised his father that he would work and then went off and did his own thing.

Jesus was pointing out the hypocrisy of the chief priests and elders in the temple, who claimed to be preaching and teaching with the authority of God and yet whose actions contradicted the will of God.^v Jesus' ministry was centered on healing, freeing people from demonic powers, restoring sight, letting the lame walk, table fellowship with sinners, and protecting the most vulnerable and marginalized. Divine authority results in healing, reconciliation, and bringing people together.^{vi} The authority of the chief priests and elders was illegitimate, because it protected their own selfish interests and resulted in the exploitation of the people.

As is always the case with Jesus' parables, there is also deeper meaning. Throughout the Old and New Testament, Israel is often compared to a vineyard. In this parable, the father asking the son to work in the vineyard was equivalent to asking people to do the good work God is calling them to do, regardless of who they were. It didn't matter if they were tax collectors, prostitutes, or sinners. No one should be excluded from God's grace or excluded from doing the good work God is calling them to do. John the Baptist and Jesus ministered to the folks, who the chief priests and elders ignored and looked down upon. John the Baptist and Jesus knew that "We all get into the kingdom the same way: by the grace of baptism."^{vii}

Churches are not meant to be country clubs, where everyone looks alike, wears expensive clothes, sends their children to private schools, and drives late-model luxury cars. Churches are to embody God's dream of the Beloved Community in which people from all walks of life, races, ethnicity, and places of origin are welcomed into the work of the vineyard. In particular, we are to welcome those who are least among us: the poor, the widow, and the orphan. Paul urged the Christians in Philippi to look out for the interests of others rather than their own selfish ambition and conceit.^{viii} He urged them to adopt the attitude of Christ.

I love serving this parish because our members have adopted the attitude of Christ in their work in the garden to provide nutritious vegetables to food banks in Richmond and Berea; the donation of winter coats to homeless persons; the work in Room in the Inn to provide shelter and food for homeless persons during the cold winter months; serving lunches to homeless persons during the spring, summer, and fall; and donation of backpacks and suitcases to children placed in foster homes. All these actions reflect Christ-like behavior. This is what we are called to do as Christian disciples.

As we love our neighbors as ourselves, we move closer to embodying God's dream of the Beloved Community. Loving and gracious God, grant us the fullness of your grace that we may adopt the attitude of Christ in welcoming everyone into the vineyard of God's work to serve the least among us and those most in need. May all we do be to the glory of your Name. Amen.

ⁱ Stanley Saunders, "Commentary on Matthew 21:23-32,"

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4575

ⁱⁱ Scott Hoezee, Matthew 21:23-32, https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-21a-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

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^{vii} Scott Hoezee, Matthew 21:23-32, https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-21a-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

^{viii} Philippians 2:3.