

Sunday January 29th, 2023

Matthew 21:28-32
“Why Did You Not Believe Him?”

There was a young man who was an avid golfer who found himself with a few hours to spare one afternoon. He figured that if he played quickly, he could get in nine holes before he had to head home. Just as he was about to tee off, an old gentleman shuffled to the tee and asked if he could play along. Not being able to say no, he allowed the older gentleman to join him.

To his surprise, the old man played fairly quickly. He didn't hit the ball far, but he plodded along consistently and didn't waste much time. Finally, they reached the ninth fairway and the young man found himself with a very difficult shot. There was a large pine tree directly in front of him, and between his ball and the green. After several minutes of watching the young man debate how to hit the shot, the old man finally said, “You know, when I was your age, I'd hit the ball right over that tree.”

With that challenge placed before him, the younger man swung hard, hit the ball up-and right smack into the top of the tree trunk. It thudded back to the ground not a foot from its original spot. The old man then offered one more comment, “Of course, when I was your age, that pine tree was only three feet tall.” All of us in this room have had moments in our lives when we have regretted taking the advice of someone.

Sometimes the erroneous advice has just irritating consequences like the young man experienced playing golf. Other times however, bad advice can cause us great harm. For example: you hear from your broker about a great stock market opportunity, and you buy thousands of dollars of shares, only to have the company do something foolish, or the economy collapse and you lose a lot of your money.

Perhaps you have had the terrifying experience of having your doctor prescribe a medication designed to help you, only to discover you have reacted badly to that medication and the side effects are brutal. It's hard to trust advice, even advice we receive from so called experts. However, we are a people of itchy ears. We long to hear what we want to hear, even if it is not the truth.

There is an interesting chapter in the prophet Jeremiah's life, chapter 29 to be exact, which demonstrates our reluctance to accept the truth. Jeremiah had sent a letter to Shemaiah who was living in exile in Babylon, telling him that God had said that he should prepare for a long exile. Jeremiah told him that God had decided to keep the people there for many years, and they should build houses and plant fruit trees.

Shemaiah was outraged; he didn't want to hear such talk. Surely God would bring them home sooner. Shemaiah wrote to Zephaniah the high priest; demanding Jeremiah be arrested for writing such a letter. In turn, God gives a message to Jeremiah that Shemaiah has been spreading lies saying the exile will be brief, and Shemaiah will be punished. Jeremiah had authority, because God gave it to him, and Shemaiah did not. The point is that even with God given authority; Jeremiah's message was not accepted.

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The bad news was not wanted, even if it was true. Enter then, if you will, our gospel lesson for today. The setting for this passage occurs the day after Jesus had cleared the temple of the money changers, and also a series of powerful demonstrations of God's mercy in healing sick people. The crowds were so overcome by Jesus' actions that even little children were shouting praises to him, "Praise God for the Son of David." (Ps. 8:2)

The religious leaders of the day were indignant; actually, that is a mild way to express it. These community, and religious power houses, were angry to the point of trying to dispose of Jesus. Why? Why did they hate Jesus so much? Could they not see the good he was doing? Actually, that was why they were so angry, because they could see the good things he was doing, and the huge crowds that followed him, praising him.

They were angry because Jesus was the center of attention and they were not. People were talking about Jesus, as Matthew 21:10-11 indicates, and not: the Pharisees, the scribes, and the priests. The whole city was buzzing with excitement at Jesus' arrival. Also burning the leader's britches was the fact that when people talked about religious matters, they quoted Jesus, not the members of the Sanhedrin or the religious court.

The revival of religious fervor originated not from their highly polished and heavily promoted religiosity, but from Jesus' acts of mercy and grace. They were frankly, jealous. They wanted the attention. They wanted people to sing praises about them and hang on their every word. Their influence was being dismissed and diminished.

The religious leaders must have spent hours debating not only what Jesus said and did, but more significantly, what authority Jesus had, to be doing his ministry. It is funny that things never really change with people. Even today we are constantly questioning authority, in fact; maybe we question authority more today than we ever have. It used to be that when a teacher, parent, politician or minister said something, it carried a lot of weight. Not anymore.

Today, most modern people believe that they are their own arbitrators of truth. How often have we heard people say, "You just don't understand, or what gives you the right?" I am sure you have heard the expression, "Who died and made you king or queen", as the case may be." We doubt the truthfulness of almost every authority figure, because we believe that for the most part, they care only about themselves. Never is this more clearly revealed than during an election campaign.

We are very cynical about our political system. I once came across an editorial cartoon that portrays our cynicism quite well. It was a picture of a grandmother with her grandchild on her lap reading a book. The child says, "Grandma, do all fairy tales begin with 'Once upon a time'?" The grandma replied, "No dear, sometimes they begin with, 'If I am elected, I promise to...'"

In Jesus' case, the religious leaders were angry because they were the duly appointed authority on matters of faith. After all, they had done the studying, the training, and had put in their time to be in a position of authority.

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What, after all, had Jesus done to gain this position of his? Who was his mentor? Where did he train? He is, after all, just the son of a carpenter, from of all places Nazareth. What gives Jesus the right to clear the temple, heal the sick, and make comments on religious matters? This question of authority is at the very core of the religious leader's objection to Jesus. He was intruding on their territory and they didn't like it.

So, this time, they go right for the heart of the matter. "By whose authority did you drive out the merchants from the temple? Who gave you such authority?" They wanted Jesus to admit publicly he thought God had given him authority, and thus they could charge him with blasphemy, and give them further cause to destroy Jesus. In very typical rabbinical fashion however, Jesus answers their question with one of his own queries.

"Did John's baptism come from heaven or was it merely human?" Jesus is not trying to avoid the question posed to him by a clever turn of the table, but is seeking to reveal the unreceptive hearts of the religious leaders. This new question thus begins a debate among the leaders. They recognize that this is no idle question. They have been well trained to know how this rabbinical questioning works.

If they say John's baptism was from heaven, Jesus will ask why they didn't believe John. If they say the baptism was from human sources, the crowds could get violent with rage, because they revered John and considered him a prophet. They were caught in their own dilemma over authority. The only answer they could bring themselves to give was, "We don't know." So, Jesus replies, "Then I won't answer your question either."

It is interesting though that Jesus does answer their question, but in a way, they did not expect; he uses a parable. It is another vineyard parable, and it is straight forward enough. There was a man with two sons, and he asked the first one to go out and work in his vineyard, but the son refused. I should point out that this refusal of a father's request was socially unacceptable in Jesus' day.

In a family, the father was lord and master, and the son's refusal was a great insult. Later however, the son changed his mind, or "repented" and he went and worked in the vineyard. The second son received the same request and was all positive about going, but he didn't go. He said yes but his actions revealed his refusal to do as his father requested. Then Jesus asks the religious leaders, "Which of the two sons obeyed the father?"

The religious leaders answered correctly, "The first, of course." The implications for the religious leaders are staggering. The religious leaders are the second son, who received the law, or the Father's demands. These same leaders gave assent to these laws, agreeing to try and follow them. But they had not obeyed it, nor have they responded to John and Jesus, who have tried to lead them back into a right relationship with God the Father.

These self-proclaimed, faithful, religious leaders, have failed in responding to God's call to service; while tax-collectors and prostitutes who originally refused God, have repented and now seek to serve him. The sad thing is that the religious leaders truly believed they were doing the right thing.

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They believed that their obsession with minute details of the law, and oppressive interpretations of the law, was what God wanted.

But is this what God really wanted. Is ritual and religious works what really warms God's heart? The prophet Hosea writings includes just one of hundreds of verses that speak of what God really wants from us. Hosea 6:6 reads, "I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices. I want you to know God; that's more important than burnt offerings." The religious leaders were really good at burning up stuff for sacrifices, but really terrible at showing mercy.

In their minds and hard hearts, they had written off entire groups of people from any place in God's kingdom. The list was quite long, and included among others: tax-collectors, prostitutes, lepers, those with handicaps, Gentiles and Samaritans. They had claimed to know what God wanted them to do, but had failed to actually go out and show mercy. Instead of being joyful that Zacchaeus, changed his mind about God and wanted to serve him; they stood outside and grumbled about Jesus eating with him.

Instead of showing compassion on the woman who broke into Simon the Pharisee's home during a dinner party, and poured perfume on Jesus' feet out of gratitude for his love; they grumbled about the impropriety of the woman letting down her hair or wasting money. Instead of recognizing Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life, who could call Lazarus back from the dead, they laughed at him.

Instead of shouting with joy when a poor man in Matthew 12 with a withered hand was healed, they grumbled because he was healed on the Sabbath. As Craig Groeschel points out, isn't it odd that the Pharisees saw healing on the Sabbath as wrong, but plotting Jesus' murder was, okay? (*It* Page 100) Instead of opening their hearts to what John the Baptist was saying in the wilderness, they grumbled about the fact he was so popular and they were not.

So, tell me, which brother are you? My greatest fear would be that I am the second brother, only giving lip service to the call of God, but not actually engaging in his work. We are always faced with the great danger that we can believe we are good Christian people simply because we say all the right things, or defend what we perceive as the proper Christian position on a whole host of issues.

But in the end, words are cheap. Action is what truly matters. This of course is one of main points of the book of James. In James 2:17 reads, "So you see, it isn't enough just to have faith. Faith that doesn't show itself by good deeds is no faith at all-it is dead and useless." The second brother may have said he would do what his father wanted but he was useless when it came to working in the vineyard.

What good is our faith if all it amounts to is an hour of worship on Sunday and maybe a few scattered moments of passing along religious sentiments, while our neighbours are in great need of some mercy? We have been shown the way of life, and it is up to each one of us to follow that way, and waste no more time harvesting sour grapes.