

Sermon Proper 21 Year A 2017

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Psalms 25:1-8

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

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Over the past few weeks our lessons have stimulated our discussion of repentance and forgiveness. This is interesting, because at the same time, those of the Jewish faith have celebrated their high holy days. They began on September 20 with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. They culminated yesterday with Yom Kippur, their Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur involves a full day of fasting and prayer marked by confession of sins. Just as our lessons two weeks ago focused on forgiveness, so too the calendar of the Jewish faith is also focusing on repentance and forgiveness. We know that repentance and forgiveness are continuing ongoing processes.

An article on the Jewish holy days by Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, appeared in last Saturday's Wall Street Journal. The article was given to me by a parishioner who recalled my preaching on repentance. The article speaks of Judaism's relationship with God. Their relationship with God is one that I believe we must see as something we share with them. Because as followers of Jesus, we too are co-inheritors of a similar understanding of our relationship and connection with the divine. In the article, Jonathan Sacks quotes Victor Frankl who says, "The real question is not what do we want from life but what does life want from us?" Sacks then goes on to say, "That is the question that Jewish people are asked on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. They ask God to write them in the Book of Life, and God asks them, what have you done with your life thus far? Have you thought about others or only yourself? Have you brought healing to a place of human pain or hope where you found despair? You may have been a success, but have you also been a blessing?"

These questions echo from our Hebrew lesson from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin." The Jewish high holy days are a response to this sort of biblical imperative.

These questions are similar to the questions that Rabbi Jesus asks us as well and they are the point at the end of this morning's parable.

The Jewish faith has begun a new liturgical year. So, too we are moving closer to the climax of our Christian year at the end of November. In last week's Gospel lesson, we heard the parable of a vineyard owner who hired laborers for his vineyard. Today's lesson is separated from last week's lesson by two events. The first event is the triumphal entry into Jerusalem that we celebrate on Palm Sunday, which set the town abuzz. This was followed by Jesus cleansing the Temple, when Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers and drove those selling sacrificial animals out of the Temple. These two actions were the proverbial last straw and brought out opposition from those in authority. These were represented by the "chief priests and the elders of the people" in this morning's lesson. The Jewish people were used to debate and dialogue and so the appropriate response was to go and confront Jesus. So they asked by what authority was he doing "these things." "These things" refer not just to the disruption of the Temple precincts but to Jesus' entire ministry which had attracted large crowds to Jesus and also stirred the city of Jerusalem.

This new thing disturbs the traditionalists. Change always does. It is tremendously unsettling and requires active engagement to understand the implications. In the midst of change and upheaval it is no easy task to understand where God may be acting. Especially in the moment. One response is always, why now, why are they attacking the sacred, the unchanging, our traditions. We hear those questions asked again and again as culture changes. We heard those questions during the height of the Civil Rights movement. Why are they so impatient? Why can't we do these things gradually or go more slowly? Give us time to adapt.

The same questions have been asked as gender roles have changed over the years.

We hear those questions echoed today as well. Similar concerns have surfaced when trying to understand demonstrations around Black Lives Matter, or about taking down memorials to the Confederacy. Or last week when conversations flared around the demonstrations taking place during sporting events.

The response of whoa, not so fast, under what authority are you doing these things, isn't just the response of the religious elites in Jesus' day. We hear the

same concerns today. Except we learned just this week that the cacophony of confrontation is being influenced by external forces and governments with an intent to sow division and rancor between us. We must be more careful than ever in interpreting the reports of events taking place.

So, the visit by those in authority like much of political dialogue today was really an attempt to trap Jesus. They were trying to get Jesus to commit the sin of blasphemy so that they could do away with him. They weren't willing to pull back the lens of judgment and ask the deeper questions of what Jesus was about. They were responding to the superficial, the disquieting actions and crowd response. Responding to those who were upsetting their environment and the way things had always been done.

But when asked by "what authority", Jesus paused and reflected. Then he responded to the question with a question of his own. He will turn the tables of entrapment. Tell me first about the baptism of John. By what authority did John proclaim and perform his baptism and call to repentance. Here was a conundrum.

The question of authority is an important one in every age. Credentials, standing and authority are important. But questioning them should not be meant as a trap. Those who ask questions must be willing to answer them as well.

So, Jesus responded with three parables. These will be the focus of our gospel readings this week and the next two Sundays.

How does the parable relate to the question they are asking? The authorities questioned Jesus' behavior and authority. So Jesus tells a parable about behavior. Jesus in the parable is pointing out the actions of the authorities. They had already responded and rejected John's call for repentance and his proclamation of the kingdom. There is no reason to expect a different answer now that Jesus is delivering the message. The issue is not Jesus' authority; the issue is how one responds to God's call to repentance and invitation into the kingdom. Questions of credentials are a mere smokescreen.

The parable offers two possible responses to God. When I was younger, I had a real problem listening to this parable. I so believe that saying yes is the right answer and that saying no is the wrong answer that I had trouble even thinking through the parable. To say, "I will not," even if only initially seemed so disobedient that I couldn't get past it. Defiance was never ok as I was growing up. Both answers felt wrong to me and so I struggled with this parable for a long time. But Jesus and God take the long view. They are looking at the entirety of our

lives. And their property is always to have mercy. This morning's Collect began, "O God, you declare your power chiefly in showing mercy and pity."

The one who says yes, but whose life says no. These are the religious authorities. And the one who says no, but who on reflection does what was asked are represented by tax collectors and sinners. Those who believe in God, who trust in God, regardless of past behavior gain entry into the kingdom of God.

What might Jesus be saying to us today? I believe his call is one we hear over and over through the course of our lives. Jesus says to us, go and work in the vineyard. And what is our response? What does the vineyard of our lives look like?

I think the questions that we are to ask ourselves are very similar to the questions that the Jewish faithful asked themselves yesterday. "What have you done with your life thus far? Have you thought about others or only yourself? Have you brought healing to a place of human pain or hope where you found despair? You may have been a success, but have you also been a blessing?"

What difference are we making in the vineyards of our lives? The vineyard is a metaphor and each of our vineyards are configured slightly differently. Yours may include family, or neighborhood, or school, or work, or volunteer center, but it can extend to clubs, social activities, shopping, and so much more. Because in every moment of our lives, Jesus is calling us. In all these places, Jesus calls us to extend our arms of love to all those whom we encounter. Because in reaching forth our hands in love, we manifest our love not just of our neighbor but our love of God as well.

The Apostle Paul encourages us, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

Yet this call from Jesus always comes with divine assistance as Paul assured us, "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

People of the Jewish faith have just celebrated their high holy days. They are reflecting upon their lives and asking deep questions. So too are followers of Jesus. So as you go out into the vineyard that is your life, I hope and pray that you feel God at work in you. Your life is of incredible value. God has placed God's hope in us. The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few, so will you go into the vineyard? The vineyard of your life is where you can make all the difference.