

**Sermon, Sept. 25<sup>th</sup> 2011 Matthew 21**  
**Diane Vie St. John's Episcopal Church**

The gospel lesson we heard this morning is a part of the intense, growing and violent controversy between Jesus and the temple leadership. If we back up to the chapter in Matthew that is right before the text we heard this morning we will find that the day prior to Jesus' encounter with the chief priests and elders he had entered Jerusalem on a donkey as the Messiah. He was greeted by noisy hosannas and shouts of "son of david" from the crowd. He promptly headed to the temple - the center of Jewish religious life -and then drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, knocking over the tables of the moneychangers, and calling the temple itself a "den of robbers".

After spending the night outside the city, he cursed a fig tree on his way back into town, withering it instantly. The religious officials in charge of the temple, still reeling from the spectacle of the previous day are in no mood to indulge this countryside rabbi and quite understandably ask to see his credentials. They ask: "by what authority are you doing these things?".

Their own authority in Israel, after all, had been given to them by God in the time of Moses and passed down for generations: but in reality the Chief priests and elders know that by asking Jesus this question they are in essence cornering him. Jesus' response is typical for Jesus. Jesus returns the challenge of the chief priests and elders with a challenge of his own and in turn corners them.

The second part of Jesus' response begins with a parable about two sons and teaches that actions speak louder than words and finally the lesson ends with Jesus announcing to the religious leaders that the lowest of the low in society, the tax collectors and the prostitutes will go into the kingdom of God in front of the religious leaders. The reason being, the outcasts believed in John who came in righteousness and they allowed themselves to be changed, transformed but the religious leaders, even after they saw all of this, would not budge.

It is easy for us sitting here today, nearly two thousand years after all of this happened, and after the resurrection, to say why did these religious leaders not get it? What did they not see? But truthfully, if we put ourselves in their shoes, how would we have reacted? What would we do if someone came and disrupted our temple, our way of living?

This lesson causes us to ask ourselves some tough questions. It causes us to take a look at our own tendencies to want to keep things as they are, to maintain the status quo. It causes us to ask ourselves if there is something we need to look at about our own resistance to change, to being transformed. Jesus was interrupting and disrupting the ways in which the Jewish leaders were teaching and living and the same can certainly happen to us today.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians urged that in the people's actions and in their attitudes as well they should follow the example set by Jesus himself. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." He says. It is clear from the gospels that following Christ's example many times requires a change. It will be up to each of us personally to determine throughout the span of our lifetimes when we are being called to change and when we are being called to stay the course in order to live following Christ's example.

The question then becomes how do you know whether God is asking you to change? How do you separate the whispering of the spirit from the other grumblings coming from within? How do you know if you are truly being faithful to Christ? Or if you are listening to your own voice or other outside voices?

An answer comes in another discourse Jesus has with the temple leaders. One of the Pharisees, a lawyer, asked Jesus another question to test him. He asked, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

This man, representing the Pharisees came to Jesus as one who thought he already knew the answer to the question he was asking. The lawyer knew that the Hebrew interpretation of scripture put all the law on equal footing. To presume to rank the laws according to importance was to assume the prerogative of God. So to ask Jesus

which of the commandments was greatest was to ask Jesus if he dared to do what the law and the prophets dare not do – to speak with the authority of God. And so he did. He answered “You shall love the lord your god with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and you shall love your neighbor as your self.”

This response of Jesus’ that once again outwitted the ones who were trying to outwit him, invites us to see the truth. The law and the prophets are and always were to be understood in the light of love. All along, Jesus was pointing it out to the Pharisees that they had gotten off track – their love of the law was no longer helping them to love God and love their neighbors and it was in fact getting in the way – not allowing them to see who Jesus really was. And we must remember, that though the religious leaders may have thought Jesus had come to abolish the law, he in truth came to fulfill it.

It was in the very wilderness we heard about in our Old Testament lesson today that Moses so many years ago proclaimed these very words to the Israelites... “Hear o Israel: The lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your might. Keep theses words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” Jesus did not come to abolish that law – he came to fulfill it and fulfill it he did.

As one of the women in our Bible study said Thursday morning, It is simple really, Love God Love your neighbor.

Simple in theory yes - not always simple in practice. Sometimes those we love disappoint us. Sometimes they don’t love us back the way we want to be loved and sometimes they seem completely unlovable.

We can certainly see in our Old Testament lesson from this morning that the Israelites where not having an easy time loving.

And sometimes when we are in our own wilderness, it is not so easy to love God either. Presbyterian pastor and writer, Fredrick Buechner, in his book *secrets in the dark* says this about this love God calls us to: “this is the love that you and I are called toward both through the wilderness times on broken legs, and through times when we catch glimpses and hear whispers from beyond the wilderness. Nobody ever claimed the journey was going to be an easy one. It is not easy to love God with all your heart and soul and mind when much of the time you have all but forgotten his name. But to love God is not a goal we have to struggle toward on our own, because what at its heart the gospel is all about is that God himself moves us toward it even when we believe he has forsaken us. The final secret, Buechner says is this that the words you shall love the lord your god becomes in the end less a command than a promise. And the promise is that yes on the weary feat of faith and the fragile wings of hope we will come to love him at last as from the first he has loved us- loved us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, because he has been in the wilderness with us.”

My friends, use the great commandment as your guiding principle in every decision you make, every time you are wondering if you are supposed to be making a change or if you are supposed to stay the course.

With each decision you make, ask yourself.. how does this fit into the great commandment – to love God, love Christ and love all people? We have a triune God which means that we have the Spirit to guide us as well. Pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Jesus reminds us that clarity in this life comes through regular encounters with the risen Christ. Our encounters with the lord are invitations to grow in our relationship with God and in our relationships with others. Jesus reminds us that clarity comes through God’s mercy and grace and love. Whether we are in the wilderness or in the land of plenty we are sent here by God to be channels of grace in this world. We are living vessels through which Christ’s love is to be expressed in a world that so desperately longs to know that love.

In the light of the cross we can see just how costly this love can be. And in the light of Easter we can see just how grace filled and beautiful and life giving this love continues to be.