

Sermon for Proper 21A
Sunday, October 1, 2023
“Commitment, not lip service”

Text: Matthew 21:32-32

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I imagine most of us have been in a situation where we were asked to do something that we didn't want to do, but in the end, we did it anyway. When I was growing up, we had chickens in our back yard, even though we lived in the city. It was my job to collect the eggs every day after I came home from school. I hated getting the eggs, because the chickens were nasty and dirty and the hens pecked at me if I tried to get the eggs they were sitting on. When my grandfather asked me if I had collected the eggs yet, I often told him, “No,” with some degree of rebellious indignation, but when I didn't think anyone was looking, I would go into that nasty smelly chicken coop and get the eggs anyhow. Some of those eggs would often end up as breakfast the next morning.

In today's Gospel lesson, we find Jesus in a confrontation with the religious leaders about power and authority. This scene comes right after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. Both actions disturbed the religious leaders greatly, because they felt their power and authority were threatened. Not only that, but when Jesus turned over the tables of the moneychangers, he disrupted a major component of the temple's economy. The scripture tells us that the chief priests and the elders—that would be the Pharisees mainly—questioned Jesus as to who gave him the authority by which he was doing all the things he had done. The chief priests and scribes certainly had good reason to ask Jesus about the source of his authority; they understood their authority as leaders in the Temple to have come from God. Jesus knew they were trying to trap him, so he responded to their questions with a question, which he knew they could not answer. That undoubtedly made them even angrier, so Jesus told them this parable.

A man had two sons whom he asked to go work in his vineyard. The first refused to go, but changed his mind and went; the second said he would go, but did not. “Which of the two did the will of his father?” Jesus asked. The Pharisees answered, “The first.” Then Jesus jabbed them with his theological dagger: “The tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

The Parable of the Two Sons, a parable of Jesus found only in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, is not so much a lesson in obedience, as it is a teaching point about repentance and discipleship. The chief priests and the elders were trying to trap Jesus into claiming that his actions were done under false authority, but Jesus knew that his authority was the authority of God himself. The Pharisees believed that they were the ones given authority from God and that they were the guardians of the Temple and the Law; they knew the Scriptures inside and out, but they were allowing their authority to turn the Temple into a business, and they were letting the words of the Torah serve as a barrier to maintaining relationships with others. For Jesus, they were like the son who said, “Yes,” to his father, but did not go into the vineyard to work. Other folks

were taking the message to heart; first it was the message of repentance that John the Baptist preached, then it was the message of new life that Jesus continued preaching. Those folks who were considered sinners of society heard that message, repented, and began to lead a new life that included having a renewed relationship with God. The message of the parable was that no matter what we have done in our past, there is always room in God's arms of grace and mercy for us to repent and return to him.

The lectionary readings last week focused on God's unlimited grace and mercy, and today's reading from the gospel reinforces that message, but takes it a step further to say that actions speak louder than words. This is a lesson in discipleship and obedience to God, but we are not called into blind faith and thoughtless obedience; rather, we are invited to be fruitful and productive believers. We can be in church every Sunday—or watch it on the internet!—we can read our Bibles every day, we can light candles, Bible verses could roll off our tongues, but none of that matters if we aren't doing those things that will bring us into closer relationship with God and each other. That's what Jesus was trying to tell the religious authorities, who were more interested in judging people for being tax collectors and prostitutes, and judging Jesus for associating with them, than for recognizing their humanity, for seeing that even tax collectors and prostitutes matter. If we claim that we're Christians, while at the same time act in ways that do not reinforce the dignity of every human being; if we claim that we are Christians yet we support those in the public arena who do not advocate for the rights and justice of every human being; if we claim that we are Christians while we judge others for their behavior and personal choices, then we are being just like the chief priests and the scribes who criticized Jesus for associating with tax collectors and prostitutes. God doesn't want empty words and gratuitous piety from us, he wants concrete commitment.

The subject of commitment at this time in our lectionary doesn't come at a more opportune time, because we're heading into the season when we talk about commitment. Yes, I mean stewardship, and I'm preparing you for what's coming later this month. We're going to be having some serious discussions about your commitment to All Saints: your commitment to this place and the various ways that you can support what happens here.

But, before we can have a discussion about that, we need to address some issues that have me very concerned. For a while now, it seems to me, it feels like something's missing. I'm feeling like there's some energy around this place that has been lost. It's like we've lost some steam; we've lost our "mojo." You are coming week after week, but maybe you're not feeling it. It's like being the son that said, "Yes," to his father, but then didn't go to the vineyard to work. This past week, I brought it up to the vestry and wardens and asked them. They confirmed my suspicions; they admitted that they're not feeling it, and I suspect if they're not feeling it, most of you aren't feeling it either. They've lost some steam, and you've lost some steam. And it's affecting your commitment to this place financially and in making things happen. I want to figure out how we can light the fire under the pot of water and generate steam again.

But you know, God has a way of showing up just when you need him to. And this week, I heard some things that made me think that maybe we keep focusing on the wrong things and we keep asking the wrong questions. We keep worrying about what's wrong. We keep complaining about what's *not* happening. We keep talking about the money we *don't* have or the people we *don't* have. But I think we're asking the wrong questions.

On Tuesday, I attended a webinar for our diocese to help us as we head into our stewardship season. And what we discussed in that session is how we need to stop focusing on the what and the how, but the *why*. If we're going to expect people to be committed to our churches, to our communities, really, to our faith journeys together, we need to be asking why, not what or how. Why are you here? Why do you keep coming back? Why do you support All Saints with your time on Sundays and at other times during the week? Why do you support what we are doing here by participating in all the activities that are happening here? Those are important questions, because if you can't articulate why you're a part of All Saints, then you aren't going to be committed to it. During lunch today, I'm going to be asking you respond to those questions. If we don't ask the questions, we won't know the answers, and we need the answers so we can do something about it.

Now I've been noticing that lately, a few things are happening around here, but we need to be doing a whole lot more. And I've been hearing some folks feel that nothing is really happening around here. And I agree! I won't say *nothing* is happening, but I will say that *more* should be happening. We need to have more activities for our members and activities that you can invite your friends to.

Later on this past week, God led me to another moment of inspiration. On Friday, I watched the inauguration ceremony of the new President of Harvard University, Claudine Gay, the second woman to hold that position and the first person of color: the daughter of Haitian immigrants, a brilliant scholar, and an inspirational visionary. In her inaugural speech, she said, "The courage of this University — our resolve, against all odds — [is] to question the world as it is and imagine and make a better one: It is what Harvard was made to do by continually recommitting ourselves to our central purpose, with renewed vision and vigor, we advance the prospects of humankind." That wisdom and vision applies to our purpose here at All Saints, too. We should be looking at our situation as it is right now and imagining how we can make it better. What would you All Saints to be, what do you want people to say when they hear the name, All Saints Church in Woodhaven? And what can we do together to make All Saints the place we want it to be? Those are some of the questions we will be asking as we discern how we can all be more committed to the ministry and witness of All Saints Church.

One of the other things that President Gay said in her inaugural speech was, "Asking 'Why not?' should be a Harvard refrain — the willingness to sound foolish, to risk ridicule, and be dismissed as a dreamer. We've seen it time and time again — the

courage to take a chance, even when success seems beyond reach.” All Saints, we need to ask ourselves, “Why not?” Don’t fall into the trap of thinking or saying that nothing is going on here. If that’s how you feel, then ask, “Why not?” and make it happen. Only you can change the narrative, with God’s inspiration and help. It’s not up to the priest; that’s not my job. My job is to inspire you to go into the vineyard and do the work. I will help you. I will try to give you the tools to do the work, but you have to be the ones to do it. We don’t need you just to come here and warm the pews.

Look at the person sitting next to you. Tell them, “I’m so glad you’re here today. I love you. I can’t wait to come back and see you here next week!” Look around this gathering. Whom do you see? Now, ask yourself, “Who’s not here?” When you go home today and the rest of this week, call them up. Tell them to come back. [to the camera] I know some of you who are watching us online could have been here. Why aren’t you here? And as you think about whom you’d like to see here and what you would like to see happening here, ask, “Why not?” Why aren’t we doing this or that, and then talk to me, talk to the wardens, talk to the vestry, and let’s make it happen!!!

Let’s not be like the son who kept saying, “Yes,” but neglected to do the work his father asked him to do. Instead, let’s be like the son who went into the vineyard, even when he wasn’t feeling it, got his hands dirty, and did the work. He tended the vines, they grew, and produced wine. Get in there and do the work of All Saints. Show your commitment to this place. Imagine new possibilities and make them happen. Together, we can produce a vintage wine that we can share with the world. Amen.

Resources

Dear Partner in Preaching, <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/09/pentecost-16a-open-future/>

SermonWriter, <http://www.lectionary.org/SW/09-28rn/Matt.21.23-32.htm>

Feasting on the Word for Proper 21 (Year A, Volume 4)

Claudine Gay, President of Harvard University, Inaugural Speech (September 29, 2023)