

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2020

(Read the prayers and scripture readings and recite the Creed aloud, even if you are by yourself, in order to hear with the ears each one. Sing or read the final hymn aloud.)

Prepare for worship: Sit in silence or with soft music for a few moments

Call to Worship:

Make Us One (TFWS 2224)

Make us one, Lord, make us one;
Holy Spirit, make us one.
Let your love flow so the world will know
we are one in you.

Centering Words:

Give us, Lord, a little sun, a little happiness, and some work. Give us a heart to comfort those in pain. Give us the ability to be good, strong, wise, and free, so that we may be as generous with others as we are with ourselves. Finally, Lord, let us all live as your own one family. (*BOW 465*)

Prayer of the Day:

God of second chances, you are always there for us. In the midst of our grumbling, we yearn to find the strength of our convictions. In the course of our struggles, we long to soldier humbly on, forsaking positions of power and authority. We want to work gladly in your vineyard, without thought of reward or acknowledgement. Renew us in your compassion and grace, that our eyes may be opened to your presence and our minds may be filled with the very mind of Christ who taught us to pray: (*Abingdon Worship Annual, 2020, 210*)

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith: Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Prayer of Illumination:

Open our ears that we may hear and our hearts and minds that we may receive your word O Lord our rock and redeemer.

(After each reading take two to three minutes to reflect upon the meaning of the passage to you today.)

Old Testament Reading: Exodus 17: 1-7

Psalms 78:1-4, 12-16

Epistle Reading: Philippians 2: 1-13

Special Music

Gospel Reading: Matthew 21: 23-32

Sermon: *Who Did What the Father Wanted?*

Hymn:

Trust and Obey (UMH 467)

1. When we walk with the Lord
in the light of his word,
what a glory he sheds on our way!
While we do his good will,
he abides with us still,
and with all who will trust and obey.
Refrain:
Trust and obey, for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.
2. Not a burden we bear,
not a sorrow we share,
but our toil he doth richly repay;
not a grief or a loss,
not a frown or a cross,
but is blest if we trust and obey. (Refrain)
3. But we never can prove
the delights of his love
until all on the altar we lay;
for the favor he shows,
for the joy he bestows,
are for them who will trust and obey. (Refrain)
4. Then in fellowship sweet
we will sit at his feet,
or we'll walk by his side in the way;
what he says we will do,
where he sends we will go;
never fear, only trust and obey. (Refrain)

Benediction:

Grant, O Lord, that what has been said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (*BOW 567*)

Response:

God Be with You till We Meet Again (UMH 673)

God be with you till we meet again;
by his counsels guide, uphold you,
with his sheep securely fold you;
God be with you till we meet again.

Matthew 21: 23-32

Jesus comes to the Temple. He finds a spot and begins teaching. This was a common practice. A Rabbi, teacher, would gather his disciples on a spot on the steps leading up to the Temple or in the Temple courtyard and teach them. Passersby might stop and listen. It was kind of a Sunday school without walls.

The chief priests and the elders, the temple authorities, confront Jesus saying, "who gave you authority to do what you are doing and to teach what you are teaching?" They are basically saying that you may be able to do and teach this stuff in those backwater synagogues in Galilee, but this is THE TEMPLE. This is God's house. You can't teach here without our authority. You could say they were saying, "This is our turf. We give authority for people to teach here," and, by implication, what they teach.

It would be like someone coming here off the street, maybe with a few followers, and start teaching or preaching in the gathering area while we are coming to church this morning. We would be wondering what they were doing here and if what they were teaching or preaching was in line with our beliefs. We want to know that our teachers and preachers have a good grasp of our basic theology and doctrine. I know, because I just finished writing a 25 page paper on it. So, the chief priests and elders were right to go ask Jesus by whose authority he was teaching.

Jesus, as he often does in Matthew, responds to a question with a question, basically saying, you answer my question then I will answer yours. Jesus asks, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Did John's baptism come from God or was it something he just thought was cool to do. This question may seem somewhat irrelevant on the surface, but Jesus is connecting himself to John and through John to all the prophets.

By doing this Jesus puts the chief priests and elders in a bind. Notice as they huddle together, they say, "If we say from heaven then he will say why didn't you believe, and if we say from human origin we may rouse the crowd because they considered John a prophet."

Now, as a quick aside, in the Biblical sense a prophet is not one who tells the future but one that proclaims the word of God. A prophet is one that gives the divine message to the intended audience be it the king or the people at large.

So, the elders and chief priests are in a bind. Either way they answer they would face negative repercussions. They give the most expedient answer, “We don’t know.”

Jesus refuses to answer them and tells them the parable of the two sons. One son tells the father no, he doesn’t feel like working today. The other tells the father that he will go and work. The one that said no changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard. The one that said yes did not go the work in the vineyard.

At first glance this parable seems pretty straightforward. The message seems to be simply to do God’s work and not just talk about it. It is the one that does God’s work that will get into the kingdom. So, let’s all do God’s work and go home. (Prior to the pandemic, I would have said to go on to Grecian Gardens but times have changed our after-church practices.)

But as Lee Corso says, “Not so fast my friends.” When we look further into the passage, after the parable, we see a much deeper message in the context of this parable. In verse 32 Jesus says that John came in the “way of righteousness.” That means that John came in the way that was right, right? Well no, righteousness means more than just being right or doing the right thing. Righteousness is that which is appointed by God to be acknowledged and obeyed by humans. John came in the way that was appointed by God that humans were to acknowledge and obey. The way that John pointed was the way of repentance.

The message of John given in Chapter 3 was to repent and then bear fruit worthy of repentance for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Repentance and bearing fruit worthy of repentance is not just confessing sins and being baptized. It is changing one’s mind, and heart, and attitudes and behavior to be aligned with the mind, and heart, and attitude and behaviors prescribed by the rule of heaven. The rule of heaven is the rule of love for God and all people.

Jesus says that the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God **ahead** of the chief priests and elders and Pharisees. How can that be? The worst of the worst sinners getting in to the Kingdom of God ahead of the good church people? Is he saying that the drunks under the Gervais Street Bridge and the hookers on Beltline are going to get into the Kingdom of heaven before us good church people?

To a degree, yes. The Pharisees and Sadducees, who could have been some of the elders in this passage, went out into the wilderness to see John for themselves. They heard John’s message of repentance, they may have even been baptized, but they did not change. They continued to do the same things they did before:

following all the rules of Torah to the letter, performing all the prescribed sacrifices, doing all the right things. But they did not change their minds, and hearts, and attitudes, and behavior to fall in line with the rule of God. They did not believe John. They saw no need to change.

The tax collectors and prostitutes, the worst of the worst sinners, went out into the wilderness to see John. They heard the message of repentance, of the need to change because God's rule was coming near. They believed and were baptized. They changed their minds, and hearts, and attitudes and behavior to fall in line with the rule of God. They recognized their need to receive God's grace and in accepting God's grace they were changed. They exited the kingdom of the world and entered the Kingdom of God. They changed from the rule of the world that said they were worthless trash and came under the rule of being a beloved child of God. They recognized their need for change and they were changed.

We have a tendency to paint the chief priest, elders, Pharisees and Sadducees as somehow inherently evil. They were not. They were good people who were doing what they thought was right. They were teaching what they thought was right theology and doctrine. They were doing what they thought God wanted them to do, but they couldn't let go of their traditional beliefs and practices to change their minds and believe that God wanted to change them. God wanted them to change from living by their old rule of adherence to the letter of the law to living by the heart of the law which is to love: to love God and neighbor, the heart of Torah.

We may sometimes be like the chief priests, elders, Pharisees, and Sadducees. We may be going about our lives doing all the right things- going to church, serving on committees, holding office, teaching, preaching, giving our tithes to the church and to the poor- but God is saying, "you need to change. You need to change your minds, and hearts, and attitudes and behavior to get them in line with my rule. You need to let go of that rule of self-centeredness, worrying just about you and your salvation, and acknowledge and obey what I appointed you to do. You need to change from a rule of self-love to a rule of selfless love, love for all my children and for my creation, to love them as I love them."

The Father wants us to change. Even though the tax collectors and prostitutes were seemingly saying "no" to God, when they heard and accepted John's message of repentance they were changed. They went to work in the divine vineyard. They were like the first son. The chief priests, elders, Pharisees, and Sadducees who were seemingly saying "yes" to God, rejected John's message of repentance and did not go into the divine vineyard. The tax collectors and

prostitutes did what the Father wanted, they changed and entered the Kingdom of God. The others did not change, so the sinners got into the Kingdom ahead of them.

The Father wants us to change. We may think we are saying yes to God with all our service to the church, but it is as we accept our need for change that God changes us. As we are changed in our minds, and hearts, and attitudes and behaviors, then we are drawn by God into God's kingdom. This is what the Father wants, us in the Father's Kingdom.