

We reenter the Gospel of Matthew this morning, as the chief priests and elders press Jesus with yet another question. Just a day or so ago in the biblical text, Jesus road into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and crowds cheered, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” The Roman Empire was nervous given the throngs of Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem for the festival week of Passover. The chief priests and elders were all about keeping the peace between the Temple and the Empire. It wasn’t disruptive enough that Jesus road into Jerusalem as branches and coats were strewn on the ground and shouts of “Hosanna in the highest” rang through the city streets. But now he has overturned the tables of the money changers at temple complex proclaiming, “My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.” Jesus continues his disruption by cursing a fig tree, causing a spectacle as it withers and dies. So, when Jesus entered the temple yet again, the chief priests and elders corner him and ask him a few pointed question. Listen now to the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 21 starting at verse 23:

<sup>23</sup> When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, **“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”** <sup>24</sup> Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup> Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, **“We do not know.”** And Jesus said to them, **“Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”** <sup>28</sup> **“What do you think?** A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ <sup>29</sup> He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?” The chief priests and elders said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Remember everyone is a bit nervous given the throngs in Jerusalem for the festival week of Passover. The Romans have tightened security and most likely leaned on synagogue leaders to keep their people in line. Jesus though keeps stirring the pot. And so, the chief priests and the elders corner Jesus with a question. It is a question that will hopefully reign in this renegade who is causing concern for the Empire as well as the principalities of the church.

Of course, given that we are in Chapter 21 of Matthew, this is not the first question asked of Jesus by religious leaders. All sorts of folks ask Jesus questions, even the Baptizer John. The Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees, as well as the chief priests and elders ask questions. Of course, their questions are normally intended to trap Jesus. They questioned his breaking with religious traditions like healing on the Sabbath and wanted to know his thoughts on divorce.

They inquired about the paying of taxes and questioned his motives. They questioned his understanding of the role of the commandments and of course, by what authority is he teaching and healing. The ones asking know that Jesus has not been certified ready to receive a call through the appropriate channels of the Temple, yet he goes about teaching, healing and challenging the status quo, which is alive and well in synagogue circles.

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority, because we certainly didn’t,” implied the chief priest and elders! Yet, Jesus doesn’t miss a beat. He turns the conversation upside down and inside out and says, “I will also ask you one question.”

Wait, aren’t the chief priests and elders, the ones in authority, the ones asking the question? Yet, Jesus makes it clear that he doesn’t answer to them. Instead he poses his own question and this redirect methodology acts as a mirror which convicts his questioners. His question causes the chief priests and elders to get into a holy huddle, as they wrestle with an appropriate answer to his question. In this very act, whether they realize it or not, they have relinquished their authority. In their holy huddle, they realize that there is no good answer to Jesus’ question. To answer one way condemns them. To answer another way incites the crowd. Both options create havoc from their perspective. So, as to save themselves they say, “We do not know.”

We do not know? Hardly! We heard their arguments. They know the ramifications of their answers, yet they just don’t want to face them. So, they chose the easy way out or so they thought, by saying, “We do not know!”

But, Jesus keeps them on edge by letting them know he has no intention of answering their question. Who is in charge here? Jesus looks directly at the chief priests and elders and quips, “What do you think?” right before he tells them a story.

What do you think? There is a football coach that barks out after practice, run 3 miles and do 200 pushups before you shower. The first-string players say, “Sure coach,” whereas the bench warmers say, “Why should we? We never get to play anyway.” Well, the first-string players don’t follow through whereas the bench warmers do. Which players did the will of the coach?

What do you think? A piano teacher gives her two students, a prodigy and a less gifted student, the same instructions: “Practice this particularly difficult part for a couple of hours in the coming week.” The less gifted student complains, but I will never be in a recital, whereas the prodigy agrees and says no problem, will do. Yet, the prodigy never puts fingers to the keys, while the less gifted student pains her parents’ ears with hours of practice. Which piano student did the will of the teacher?

What do you think? There were two sons and the father said to the first, “Son, go and work in our vineyard today.” Without missing a beat, the son says, “I have other plans, dad, so you won’t see me in our vineyard today.” The father disappointed in his first son approached his other son and said, “Go and work in our vineyard today.” The dad is pleased with his son’s enthusiasm, “Sure, dad, I’ll work in our vineyard.” But, his enthusiasm doesn’t translate into action. Instead the first son changed his mind and went into the vineyard. Which son did the will of the father?

Haven’t we all said we would do something only not to do it? Maybe, you have memories from your childhood when you didn’t do what you said you would do for your

parents. Maybe it was a commitment to a teacher. Maybe it was to a friend or family member. Maybe it was to a colleague or boss. Maybe it was here at the church. Maybe it was even a commitment to yourself that you didn't keep. I am sure that at some point in our lives, all of us have not followed through on something we said we would do, even something as trivial as, "Sure, I'll take out the trash or wash the dishes or walk the dog or do the laundry," but then it doesn't happen.

Right after Jesus told the chief priests and the elders that he wasn't going to answer their question, he tells the story of the two sons. He doesn't let the chief priests and elders off the hook when the story is finished either, because he makes them tell him the moral of the story! Which of the two sons did the will of his father? The answer is obvious, the one who did what was asked, even though he at first said no. The correct answer is not the son who just paid lip service to his dad, smiling and saying sure, but did not do what he said he would do.

The problem with this little story though, is that it is not only about the chief priests and the elders. Because right after they told Jesus the 1<sup>st</sup> son was the son who did the father's will, Jesus says, "Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you!"

If this scene was displayed in a couple cartoon frames, we would see steam coming out of the ears of the chief priests and elders. There might even be bubbles above their heads with symbols suggesting expletives thought, but not voiced. Jesus has just said those on the other side of the tracks or even those on the wrong track are going to be the first in line when it comes to entering the kingdom of God! This isn't just about the chief priests and the elders, the good church folk. It is about all who might hear of the good news, even those who never darkened the doors of the temple.

Jesus' redirect methodology, answering a question with a question and driving home the point with a story, acts as a mirror and the chief priests and elders find themselves standing naked in front of the mirror. Is it any wonder that they want to kill Jesus or at the very least silence him?

The chief priests and elders thought their status as good church folk was enough to get them front row seats in the kingdom of God. They thought their job was to be gate keepers at the temple door, to judge, to determine who was good enough to enter and who should be turned away. They certainly thought they would be first, not last. Yet, like Nathan's tale which caused King David to convict himself, Jesus' story caused the chief priests and elders to convict themselves. Yet, convicted they chose to hold their ground. They chose not to admit their shortfall. They choose not to change.

So, what is the point for us today? What is our take away from this particular scripture story? I hope it is obvious, for Jesus' question, "Which son?" is an invitation for us to admit our shortfall and be ready to change. It is also an invitation to go and work in the overgrown and messed up vineyards in our world, which are in desperate need of attention.

First, which son? Those of us in the church can sometimes fall into the same trap as the chief priests and elders did. We think we have it all together. We know the rules and know what is expected of us. We even know when others are not towing the line. We, too easily, judge others by our knowledge of the inner circle of churchiness. Someone walks in and immediately we draw conclusions. "John the Baptizer came in the way of righteousness, yet you did not change your minds," said Jesus to the chief priests and elders. Could we be more

like them than we care to admit? Are we so enamored by the way things are that we refuse to see the way of righteousness before our eyes? Is God calling us to something more than what is? Yet, first we must recognize our own shortfalls or as the psalmist said, "God leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way."

Second, if we have ears to hear, God is calling us to go and work. Go and do some weeding. Go and do some tilling. Go and do some harvesting. The work is plentiful, but the workers are few!

Which son are we? Do we say Sunday after Sunday, sure God, we will work in your vineyard, only to never do so? Do our good intentions ever translate into action? Or do we think, like the chief priests and elders that our churchiness is good enough and all that is required?

There is one verse in scripture that has always weighed heavy on my heart and it is found in the Gospel of Luke, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." Or as Eugene Peterson translates, "Great gifts mean great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!"

We in this church have been entrusted with much. We have great gifts which mean great responsibilities. And the vineyards we are being called to work in are in disrepair. There is much work to be done. Yet, will we trust God to lead us in God's ways? Will we dare to humble ourselves and walk in the way of righteousness even if it changes us?

Of course, you might be thinking which vineyard is God calling us to work in? The needs of the world beyond these walls is so immense from the 58-beautiful people whose lives were cut short by senseless violence last Sunday evening to the havoc hurricane Nate is inflicting on the Gulf Coast, let alone the devastating damage of hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose and Maria that have already faded from news headlines. I know the need right here in our local community can be overwhelming, as those without homes seem to increase as our state prisons are emptied due to overcrowding. And maybe the need is in our very own lives such as health or financial concerns overwhelm us. And then there is there is our church, which requires generous volunteers and contributors to keep the doors open.

So, what is the take away for us today? God is calling us into the vineyards. God knows the needs all around us are overwhelming, yet God calls us to act, to serve, and to share God's generous love with others. Our faith is not a set of rules or expectations, or a *you're in and you're out* sort of faith. The chief priests and elders were good church folk that had it all wrong.

Let us not be good church folk that have it all wrong! Let us humble ourselves, always willing to stand in front of Christ's mirror, as we recommit to working in the vineyards of this world. Amen.