

“Walking Humbly with God”

As I have said before, when looking at scripture it is always important to be aware of the context. In this case the context is Jesus’ last days before he is crucified, what we call Holy Week. Just yesterday Jesus entered Jerusalem to the adulation of the populace. He then went to the Temple and drove out the money changers and merchants turning over tables and creating mayhem as he shouted, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”¹

After Jesus cleansed the Temple, “the blind and the lame” came to him and he healed them right there in the Temple precincts.² The Temple priests and scribes, seeing all of this, get angry. These are the days leading up to the Passover and Jesus’ actions are riling up the crowds and upsetting the orderly way things are done in the Temple.

In today’s reading, Jesus, having spent the night in Bethany just outside of Jerusalem, returns to the Temple and is teaching. The Temple priests and elders have had more than enough of this backwoods rabbi and they challenge him by asking, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”³

At first blush one might think this is a simple question but it is multivalent. One aspect is, “Who told you could teach here?” The Temple is run by these priests and elders; they give or withhold permission for teaching on the Temple grounds. Another aspect is “We want to know where you studied and who your teachers were. The might say “We had the very best teachers. What’s more we think you may not have had a teacher at all.” And a third thing this question means is, “We think you are going to tell us that God gave you the authority and that God taught you what you are teaching. If you say that you are going to be in BIG trouble, because that is blasphemy!”

We know that whenever Jesus is asked one of these trick questions he responds with a question of his own. In this case he asks the priests and elders about the authority of the baptism of John the Baptizer. Remember we are in the midst of a crowd of people that Jesus has been teaching and healing in the precincts of the Temple. The crowd is friendly to Jesus not the priests and elders. The priests and elders are in a pickle. They did not like John, they want to say that John’s baptism had no heavenly authority, but they know that will make the crowds angry. However, if they say that John’s baptism was from God Jesus will say, “Why did you not believe in him?”⁴ They feel they are in a quandary. They take the coward’s way out by saying, “We do not know.” Jesus responds “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

Jesus could have left it there, but he continues by telling a simple parable about two sons.⁵ One son says he will work in the field and doesn’t. The other son

¹ Matthew 21:13 NRSV

² Matthew 21:10 NRSV

³ Matthew 21:23b NRSV

⁴ Matthew 21:25b NRSV

⁵ Thanks to Amy Jill Levine who points out the Biblical trope “A man had two sons...” in her book *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* [New York: HarperOne, 2015].

says he will not work in the field, but does. Jesus asks which one did the will of his father. Everyone agrees it is the one who went and worked.

Not all parables are difficult to figure out, but it does not mean they are without effect. For in this instance it becomes plain to the priests and elders that they are being condemned. They are the ones who say they will do the will of the Father and according to Jesus are not, while the lowest members of society, tax collectors and prostitutes are the ones who went to John for his baptism of repentance. Thus they will enter the Kingdom of Heaven ahead of the priests, scribes and elders who have not repented.

That had to sting. Those of us who feel we are righteous by profession (like me), or because we read the Bible daily, or attend church regularly would expect to be first into heaven. Yet, if we have not repented we are not really doing the will of God, we are just acting it out. The people we look down on, who despite their many flaws and failings have asked for forgiveness and truly repented, will go ahead of us to the heavenly kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, priest, scribes, and elders there is good news and difficult news in this parable. The good news is that we are not condemned to an eternity of damnation because of our lack of true repentance. The difficult news is that being holier than thou is not the answer. Humility in the face of our sins and true repentance (asking forgiveness for and turning away from our wrongdoings), are what God asks of us.

We prefer being told we are good and that those others over there are clearly bad. We prefer feeling we are the chosen ones while condemning others who do not look like us, act like us, go to our colleges or prep schools, live in the right neighborhoods, drive the right cars and vote for our candidates. We prefer being part of the Middleburg mystique and having others “oo and ah” over us.

All the puffing up we do makes no difference. Humility and repentance are what God asks of us. They are what give us peace. As the prophet Micah wrote, “[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good. What does the LORD require of you? Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”⁶ That is it. That is everything. All the rest is commentary.

⁶ Micah 6:8 preacher’s translation