

Matthew 21:23-32

Every now and then DeSha asks me if I want to do something that I am really not at all interested in doing. Now I could just say that I'm not interested but instead, I might use sarcasm and say, "oh yeah, I really want to spend the whole day shopping!" as I roll my eyes. She knows by the tone of my voice and my actions that what I am saying isn't lining up with what I mean. I am saying one thing but meaning something totally different.

Obviously my words and actions don't line up. Or maybe sometimes I might be saying yes to something that I really don't want to do, but feel I have to. Then my heart is not in it and I don't put in the energy I should into whatever it is. Maybe I have every intention of doing something, but then don't actually ever get around to doing it. I have been guilty of all these things.

Maybe the way my words and actions don't line up is that I don't speak up against something or for something when I really should because I am afraid of how some people might respond. Say what you mean and mean what you say...

Whatever the reason, whatever the method, there is something wrong when our words and our actions don't line up. Today we see this in the parable... about people whose words and actions don't line up.

Jesus desires a "change of heart" in us making a difference in this world...especially when things are messed up.

We all have had these experiences, where we or others promise far more than ever delivered...and organizations are guilty of this as well...

So I hear again and again from people who are looking for truth, from people who are seeking to know God, that they think of themselves as spiritual... they want to believe in God and they think there is definitely something more to this world than just the physical. They are looking for meaning but they just don't like organized religion...Church right now is what is called in marketing terms" a poisoned brand"!

And organized religion can be a scapegoat at times. It may be that folks don't like the idea of God or anybody else telling them how they should live or act or what they should do.

Sometimes people allow their dislike for organized religion to become an excuse to avoid truly following where their spirits may lead them. Organized religion does make a good bad guy...and sometimes they really are the bad guy.

People can see religion as a structure that is more interested with its organization and rituals than with spiritual truth, more interested in money and power than in helping make the world a better place for all...not just their own. When we get organized, some things do get lost that Jesus taught us.

Suddenly, there is a hierarchy that Jesus doesn't seem all that interested in. Suddenly, there is something or someone above you telling you what to believe so that you don't have to figure out your own relationship with the Divine for yourself. Now the Temple was the organized religion of Jesus' day!

The interesting thing is that Jesus didn't have much to do with organized religion Himself. He didn't seek priests and prophets to have as the leaders of His movement. He didn't have the Pharisees and Sadducees and teachers of the law as His primary followers. It seems that they were more interested in their power and in trying to put Him in his place rather than to really hear what it was He had to say about God.

Instead, Jesus took those who had not too much to lose...tax collectors and fishermen and ordinary people...these were His first disciples and leaders of God's movement then.

There is an old story that tells of a man who died and went to heaven. Heaven was beautiful...lush gardens and glittering mansions. But then the man came into a room lined only with shelves. On the shelves piles of human ears! The guide explained that these ears belonged to all the people on earth who listened each week to the word of God...but never acted on God's teachings. Their worship never resulted in action. When these people died, therefore, only their ears ended up in heaven.

Jesus is dealing with a bunch of "earless" religious folks in this passage, and it would be to our benefit to use our ears to listen in on the conversation. It's so easy to mistake self-righteous attitudes for true faith. Any one of us can be guilty of this sin. This passage packs a powerful message, telling us...

1. How God's grace is shocking.
2. How we are to live our lives.
3. And, how no one is excluded from the Kingdom of God, not even religious leaders like the Pharisees (BTW Paul was one of those guys)

Jesus goes on and tells the people and specifically the temple leaders this parable. Remember parables are always reflective of the heart...like a mirror. And the parable is pretty clear today. There is a man who has work that he needs done and so he asks his two sons to go out to the vineyard and work.

One son shows a stubborn streak of independence and disobedience and says no to his father, but then later he finds himself able to, so he goes into the field and does what his father asked. The other son tells his dad sure thing...yes of course...but then never goes into the field to work...he doesn't follow through.

Jesus wonders which is the one that did the father's will? The answer is obvious. Actions speak louder than words... and what matters isn't what you say you're going to do... but rather what you actually go out and do. Look at our world today...how many empty promises are made...do their actions reflect their hollow words?

Jesus identifies the one who said no and then went with the tax collectors and the prostitutes; he identifies that son with the lost. These are the people who made bad decisions earlier in their lives and headed off in the wrong direction, but then repented. They realized they were heading in the wrong direction...They turned back and followed through.

Now immediately preceding and following this parable we find passages critical of the chief priests and the Pharisees. Matthew has placed three parables together here to mark the obstinance of the religious and political leadership. MMMM sounds familiar...problems with religious institutions and politics...

The parable centers on saying versus doing. Giving Lip service! In this circumstance, the chief priest and the Pharisees appear on the surface to be doing God's will, but in reality, aren't doing anything at all to further God's kingdom. On the other hand, the tax collectors and sinners appear not to be doing God's will either, but because of the change brought about in their lives by Jesus they actually are.

Remember the first shall be last and the last first. Jesus always turns things around...the ways of the world are not the ways of God.

In this parable both sons disappoint their father. The first by saying no, and the second by saying yes and not following through.

Jesus in preaching the good news is actually bad news to the religiously complacent. The religious establishment were those who loudly proclaimed their own commitment to God only to refuse once God shows up and holds them accountable... They liked things just the way they are!

The tax collectors and prostitutes on the other hand, were living lives that had rejected God as well but who then changed course and embraced the good news when God showed up.

The parable is enticing the Jewish leaders to judge themselves. In refusing to acknowledge this they were putting themselves in the position of the boy in the parable who said yes to the father but then failed to go into the vineyard. The vineyard is equivalent to the world in this parable...God's creation! To work in God's vineyard is the equivalent of being engaged in stewardship of God's kingdom here on earth.

Notice how Jesus accepted, and rejoiced in, his own marginalized status. He was not part of the religious establishment; in their eyes, he wasn't even a proper priest (even though we refer to him as 'our great high priest') Jesus certainly didn't have any of the proper credentials!

He was a blue-collar worker, a Galilean from Nazareth and the OT held that nothing good could ever come out of Nazareth - his birthplace! And yet he loved God passionately with all His being...He reached out to all sorts of people... revealing the love of God through His actions... and people's hearts and lives were changed forever.

The Marginalized and common people flocked to Jesus because His actions were in alignment with God's will so it didn't matter whether or not He was a "real" priest... they all recognized that God was definitely working through this guy.

So perhaps we too can get hung up over questions of authority and what titles people have and what robes or uniforms people wear... Bottom line: Can people see God reflected in us by how we live and move and have our being?

Are we loving others...especially the marginalized, as Jesus loved them? This is what leads to transformation and the ushering in of God's kingdom here on earth.

The vineyard, the world...its' always a mess. There are always disasters in the world. There are always wars somewhere. There are always divorces and families falling apart. There are always poor folks living down the street, with not enough money and emotional resources to make it.

And what is our reaction, or the Churches reaction, to the pain and suffering in the world around us? Too often, we merely hold our worship services and pray in the middle of the vineyard. We have our Bible studies in the middle of the winery. And so God, in the parable for today says well I need some real work done in my vineyard...I seek those to do the work in my world.

In other words, this parable is an invitation for us to walk the talk! It is a challenge for us to now go into the world and take action.

In Jesus' parables, the accent is always on the last figure, on the last personality of the story. That is where the focus is. The focus is on the second set of people, the tax collectors and prostitutes, who actually had a change of heart and went and did the work.

You see, Jesus' problem with those in authority was that they too needed a change of heart; but they felt just fine the way things were; that they were right in their thinking and they knew better. And that's the way it has always been: in the Old Testament, in the time of Christ and certainly that's true today!

Those who profess to be God's own people can easily become blind to the world around them and lose their way...giving into to power, status, ego and money...all that ill the kingdom of man.

And so Jesus is inviting us to have a change of heart!

Jesus told us a story about two sons—one who was a joy in the morning but a disaster at midnight, and another who was a pain at sunup but a surprising source of pride at sundown.

He wanted to highlight the difference between those who talk a big game, and those whose actions speak louder than their words or appearances. Jesus' critics beat him up over neglecting the big shots in the synagogue and befriending lowlifes like tax collectors and sinners.

But Jesus wanted them to know that God isn't impressed by the show and appearances; Instead God is impressed when we show up in the world...God's world! Jesus challenged the establishment—as He challenges you and me today—which child will we be?

Jesus is always more concerned about mending relationships rather than following protocols. We must constantly be wary of not mixing up our rituals and man-made laws and rules with the way we act towards one another. God's vineyard is out there... not inside these four walls. God is where ALL God's people are...especially those outside our walls!

So may we come to know and do God's will in the world... and may our worship of God be the first step in maintaining our relationship with our creator and with each other...for that is where God lives - in our hearts...and out there in the world.

Your faithful servant,

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