

What Would Jesus Think?

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 21:23-32

September 25, 2011

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Matthew 21:23-32

When he 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?"²⁴ 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."²⁵ 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?'"²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'²⁹ He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" They 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."³² 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.



Anybody that was here yesterday for our second Hope Family Picnic knows that for one dollar you could throw a whipped cream pie in my face. Somehow, the rule became that kids under 12 could do it for free – I don't remember agreeing to that part of the deal – which led to a whole lot of whipped cream in my ears and eyes and nostrils. It was a lot of fun! As I looked through the photos yesterday afternoon I was struck by the sermon message board behind me as I was being slathered in cream – it reads

"What Would Jesus Think?," today's sermon title. Colleen Stango tells me she thinks Jesus would think well of me for sitting there while people pummeled me with paper plates filled with "Nonfat Milk, Cream, (Adds a Trivial Amount of Fat) Sugar, Corn Syrup, Maltodextrin, Inulin, (Chicory Extract), Cellulose, Mono and Diglycerides, Polysorbate 80, Artificial Flavors, Carrageenan."

What do you think Jesus would think?

French philosopher Voltaire once wrote that we ought to "judge a [person] by his [or her] questions rather than his [or her] answers." In Matthew's Gospel, all sorts of people ask Jesus all kinds of questions. Both John the Baptizer and Pontius Pilate ask questions about Jesus' identity; John asks "are you the one we are waiting for or should we look for another" (11:2-3), and Pilate asks "Are you king of the Jews?" (27:11). The Pharisees, the Scribes, Sadducees, chief priests and elders asked questions to try to trap Jesus: "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." (15:1-2), they ask for proof with "Jesus, can you give us a sign?" (12:38; 16:1), they ask about divorce (19:2), about taxes (22:15-17), about resurrection (22:23-28), about the role of the commandments (22:24-26). The disciples asked him questions; who is the greatest among us (18:1), what good deed do we have to do to receive eternal life (19:16), they ask for a sign concerning Jesus' coming at the end of the age (24:3). And for every other question someone else following Jesus asked, Peter would ask another; "How often must I forgive?" (18:21), "We left everything for you, what do we get?" (19:27).

And here in today's reading the religious leaders challenge him directly and try to trap him into an answer they can use against him. "When [Jesus] entered the temple," Matthew's author writes, "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?'" (21:23).

All of the questions are revealing and most are self-serving. Those

who ask Jesus questions usually want to corner him or impress him or get something from him. And to every pointed question Jesus invariably offers an equally pointed answer – most often a parable about the kingdom of God, about God’s reign, about who God is in relation to us. Here in Matthew 21 Jesus responds to the question put to him with a question of his own, and a parable to illustrate it.

The chief priests and elders ask Jesus where his authority comes from. His return-question is about John the Baptizer. He asks them if John's baptism came from heaven, or from the human mind? Jesus’ question reverses the trap which the chief priests and elders are trying to set for him. His accusers take the fifth, refusing to answer Jesus lest it incriminate them in the eyes of the crowds. So Jesus, in turn, doesn't answer their question about his authority either. But he does give them a parable. And what I find remarkable is that he begins the parable with a question.

“What do you think?,” Jesus asks. “What do you think?” All these questions asked of him throughout the Gospels. “Who are you?” “What are you doing?” “Where did you come from?” “Where are you going?” “What would you have us do?” Almost every question asked of him has behind it that single question that is on our message out front. “Jesus, what do you think about ...” fill in the blank. What does Jesus think?

That doesn’t seem to matter to Jesus. What Jesus thinks doesn’t really matter to him. He wants to know – what do *you* think?

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?”
What do you think?

The parable sets up a comparison of two sons. One who says he will do what his father asks, but doesn't, with one who says he won't, but does. The comparison forces us to ask yet another question, *Which am I?* Am I the one who presents myself as obedient while running around doing whatever I want? Or am I the one who to all appearances is the "black sheep" in the family but in the end does what is needed? Who am I? Which am I? Which are you?

There is an accusation in Jesus’ parable – some who claim to obey God and observe the requirements of the Law fail, in actuality, to do so. Is this who we are, as believers? – as pastors, church members, those who claim to be followers of Jesus who reminds us over and over again that God calls us to love, calls us to justice, calls us to mercy and tolerance and peace and compassion? Is that who I am? Am I the pretender who simply claims to follow when I don’t act on what God asks of me?

There is – as in all parables by definition – a reversal of expectations – those who are seen as the antithesis of the "good" believer, those who on the surface seems as if they have failed to live in the right way, will be given entry to the kingdom of heaven first. Which are you?

After telling us the parable, Jesus returns to John the Baptist. He returns accusation for accusation, "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." The one whose voice cried out in the wilderness, who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord, preaching repentance; went un-recognized and un-believed. They who said they believed but didn’t do what God asked of them, they who did not change their mind, Jesus tells us, will not find God’s kingdom. For them, as Jesus says elsewhere, it is easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than for them to enter the kingdom. But the tax collectors and the

prostitutes did what was required of them. Which am I? Which will you be?

The two questions that bracket this parable are the keys to the parable. Jesus asks: “What do you think? ... Which of the two did the will of the parent?” The first question brings us directly into this parable – it’s not about what Jesus thinks the parable means – he wants to know what we think about it. The parable focuses on what the children in the story did, not what they said they did and opens us up to the disparity between what is said and what is done. And that’s not time or context specific is it? Parables are not lost in time or space – they speak now as they did when first offered. The disparity between what we do and what we say is – or should be – just as clear to us as what hits us at the end of the parable. The faithful one is not simply and finally the one who says what the parent wants but rather it is the one who does what the parent asks.

The end question makes us decide who we want to be. If we answer that the one who promised but failed to follow through, then we align ourselves with those who have little chance of understanding let alone being a part of God’s kingdom now or later. If we answer that the other one did the will of the parent – the one who never promised anything but did what was required – we align ourselves with the tax collectors and the prostitutes and we face shame in our community.

The dilemma we have is that in reality, it really is we who are sitting in church who *say* many things. But this text puts the focus on what we actually *do*. Just exactly what is it that we do after we leave church on Sunday? Do we put our money where our mouth is? Not that this is all about money because I’m sure the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the priests, the scribes put their money in the Temple treasurer’s box every Sabbath – but what about when they walked out the Temple gate? What did they do?

They pointed judgment at others who they thought were the rule-breakers. They called for the stoning of anyone they thought were disobeying God. They took money from those who truly needed what little they had to survive. They ignored the sick, the children, the sinners, the outcast. They walked past the man begging on the street, they stepped over the woman laying in the gutter too weak to move, they ignored the cries for justice of those who felt demeaned and pushed aside. They acted as if they didn’t know what God required of them even though, as the learned ones in society they were thought to know it all.

We may not be the chief priests and elders of Jesus’ day, asking the Messiah accusing questions. Still, the parable should speak volumes to us when each of us hears it. And it’s okay if each of us hears it differently so long as it speaks to us of what it means to be in the kingdom and as long as it impacts our lives.

There is a beautiful rabbinic blessing that says; “May your leaders be those broken by compassion.”

Would that our leaders – church leaders, financial leaders, political leaders, moral leaders. Imagine a world where the human leaders who we look to for guidance were “broken by compassion.” Imagine. Would we be in the financial crisis we’re in today – we in the US or in Europe or in Africa – if our decision-makers made decisions based on their hearts being broken but the devastation that is poverty and hunger and thirst? Would we be at war if our government leaders led by their hearts broken by the sight of children burning in the flames of a bomb or the wail of a woman whose family was taken by an anonymous drone controlled by an unseen face thousands of miles away? If our leaders were moved to compassion rather than vengeance the world would be more safe and secure than we can today even imagine. Would people die for lack of healthcare?; Would our abuse of natural resources lead to the destruction of our life-support system that our planet is to us?; Would we be afraid of each other when we pass in the streets if we felt with compassion the fears of the person walking toward us?

“May your leaders be those broken by compassion.” May all of us be broken by compassion and turn our lives toward the doing rather than the saying.

Jesus' parable is a challenge. It asks us how we will respond to the gospel – the reaction to the parable, decision is ours whether or not we will change our mind and not only say we believe but whether or not we will actually follow through on that belief.

Jesus' question, and the answer he points us to in the parable of the two sons, pushes us to the point of reflection and decision. Which will we be? Which can we be? Will we change our mind, and believe?

A few years ago, someone came up with the great marketing idea of using the slogan, “What Would Jesus Do?” – WWJD. You've seen it. Bracelets, bumper stickers, Websites, even parodies like my son's favorite “Walk With Jacob Dylan.” But you know what, I'm not so sure that's the question we need to be asking. Nor is the question, “What Would Jesus Think?”. That's not what's going on in the Gospels – with Jesus teachings and miracles and parables.

The better questions to ask for us today? “What would *you* do?” WWYD. Or “What would *you* think?” That's the question Jesus asks us. That's the question we need to be asking ourselves.

What do you think?

Amen.