



Sunday October 1, 2023
Matthew 21:23-32 (Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Last week Tuesday I was supposed to go visit Pastor Chris to see how he's been doing and catch him up on a few church things. Except on Tuesday morning shortly before I was supposed to leave for his house, he sent me a text saying, "*Sorry, but we'll have to reschedule – I'm having some weird pain and I'm headed to the ER.*" About an hour later he texted me an update to say that it was a kidney stone, and they were sending him home. Needless to say he wasn't very happy.

Then, that evening after he'd gotten some rest he called me to catch up on all the things we missed talking about earlier. But there was *one thing* in particular that he was pretty worked up over. He shared with me that many of you have sent cards and left messages that you're praying for him – but after this little trip to the ER he said he's not feeling it, so either you're not following through with your prayers or you're doing something wrong. So, it's time you start following through on what you said you're gonna do!!

I began with this snarky little story today not because I don't believe that you're following through with your prayers or that you don't truly care for Pastor Chris.

No, I opened my sermon with this today because I fear that at times far too many of us settle for a shallow, "words only" version of our faith life. Over time, we learn to "talk the talk." We figure out what the magic words are – the words that will show off our supposed spiritual maturity to the world. We "confess with our mouths" during Sunday worship, or at the dinner table with our families, or in our midweek Bible studies, and then somehow we forget that the life God calls us to live is a wholly integrated life – a life in which our words and our actions enrich, reflect, and reinforce each other.

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus tells the story of a man who had two sons. When the father asked the first son to go and work in the vineyard, that son said, "*No, I will not,*" but later changed his mind, and then went and did the work his father needed done. When the father asked the second son to go help in the vineyard, that son said, "*I will, sir,*" but then he *didn't* go. After telling this story, Jesus asks the chief priests and the elders "*Which son did the will of his father?*"

Of course *we already know* the correct answer. We know it as well now as the chief priests and elders knew it back in Jesus's day. The first son did the will of his father. It wasn't what either boy *said* that mattered in the end; it was what they *did*.

So, yes, we know the correct answer to Jesus's question – and yet we struggle to bridge the gap between what we say we believe, and what we actually go out and do in light of those beliefs. Sometimes, we don't even struggle; we fall back into complacency or laziness. We tell ourselves that our words, or our intentions, or our aspirations, or our vague future plans are enough to keep God off our backs. We convince ourselves that action is just too hard and disruptive – and therefore unnecessary.

Which is precisely why I think Jesus aims this particular story at the chief priests and elders when they demand to know who the heck he thinks he is: "*By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?*" I think a little context will help to set up this story for you.

As today's Gospel reading opens, it's the Monday of what we now call Holy Week. Jesus has just spent the weekend entering Jerusalem on a stolen donkey, receiving the love of the crowds, cursing a fig tree, and slinging a whip around the temple to cleanse it of corruption. In other words, he has just spent the weekend making a whole lot of holy trouble, and the religious establishment is furious with him. They can't believe this traveling preacher's nerve. His boldness. Again, who the heck does he think he is?

As is typical of Jesus, he refuses to answer his accusers' question about authority. Instead, he *asks them* a question that is just as pointed, just as tricky: "*Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?*"

The chief priests and elders know that if they admit that John the Baptist was a prophet sent by God, Jesus will ask them why they rejected John's teaching, and refused his invitation to repent and receive baptism. At the same time, they know that if they say John was nothing more than a misleading quack, the crowds – who love John – will turn on them. So they refuse to answer the question.



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This is when Jesus pulls out the story of the father and his two sons – and concludes the story with the zinger that further enrages his accusers, and just about guarantees his crucifixion five days later. Jesus tells the chief priests and elders; *You are like the second son in the story. You talk the talk, you make lofty promises, you speak in eloquent religion terms. But when John came and offered you the good news of the kingdom, you refused to act. You refused to do the actual work of God.*

Meanwhile, the people whom you deem the worst sinners – the tax collectors and the prostitutes. They're like the first son in the story. When John offered them the gift of repentance and salvation, they responded – even though their lives until then hadn't been particularly moral. Recognizing their own helplessness, hopelessness, and wickedness, they headed to the wilderness in obedience to God, and repented in the waters of baptism.

And yet even then – even when you saw countless others embracing the Gospel, you refused to change your minds. And so the prostitutes and tax collectors, the people at the bottom of your religious hierarchy of goodness and badness, will enter God's kingdom ahead of you.

But let's not shake our heads in disgust at the ignorance of the chief priests and elders, and then walk away as if this Gospel isn't for us. **Because it is for us.** The judgment implied in Jesus's story of the father and the two sons is directed at every one of us who claims the name "Christian." We're meant to be uncomfortable, to be confronted, to ask ourselves: *which son am I?*

Am I the son who makes promises I fail to keep? Am I the son who talks the talk, and sincerely believes that my holy-sounding words are enough? Am I the son who doesn't see repentance as a lifelong endeavor – an endeavor that doesn't end after the baptism, or confirmation service, or the new member class at church.

Or am I the son who says the wrong thing, but finally repents and obeys, anyway? The son who might not sound all spiritual and holy, but still does the work of love and mercy when the rubber hits the road? The son who recognizes that God is still at work, here and now, doing new things – transformative things? The son who changes his mind when new truth, new life, new possibility, and new hope reveal themselves?

What Jesus opposed through the story of the father and the two sons was all forms of religion that stop at empty words. All forms of faithfulness that don't move us into the world of concrete action on behalf of justice, mercy, equality, love, and compassion. All forms of Christianity that flicker to life on Sunday morning, but then fade out between Monday and Saturday.

Dear friends, we are invited to be like the first son. We are invited to be like the tax collectors and the prostitutes. But we can't do this if we keep our faith bound to our hearts and minds alone without also living one with our actions.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God is reaching out to us in grace, love, and acceptance – calling us to hope-filled and purposeful lives of service to our neighbors – but will we listen? God is inviting us once again to see, to accept and to respond to God's amazing grace and live into the future God has prepared for us. Like it or not, our faith is meant to be embodied. To be alive. To be active. And in the kingdom of God, our words – even the most beautiful words – are simply not enough. Thanks be to God!
Amen.