

**17 Pentecost
September 27, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

The reading from Matthew's gospel this morning tells the story of a landowner who has two sons. He tells one son to go out and work in the fields, but the son refuses, then later changes his mind, and goes and gets the job done. The father tells a second son to go out and work in the fields, and the son says that he will, only to never appear. Jesus asks those who are listening, "Who did the will of the father?" And they answered, "The first."

Last week we heard Jesus say, "The kingdom of Heaven is like this ..." And then he went on to tell the parable of the vineyard workers who all get paid the same at the end of the day. So, it would be very easy to believe that the story that we hear today is another of Jesus' parables that he is telling his disciples. We've heard about the farmer sowing seeds ... about the wheat and the weeds ... the farmer storing his wheat in barns ... the vineyard owner and the workers. And next week we will hear another parable about a vineyard owner. So, one might imagine that this must be another one of those kinds of tales. However, something very different is happening in this story we hear today.

Instead of speaking to the disciples, Jesus tells this story to the chief priests and elders of the Temple in Jerusalem. This occurs when Jesus was in Jerusalem for what we now call Holy Week. To be honest, this story does not belong here ... stuck among the parables that we have been hearing about the Kingdom of Heaven. This is not a parable ... it is a "gotcha" story to ridicule the chief priests and elders. This is Jesus speaking truth to power.

As I mentioned, this story is taking place on Monday of Holy Week. Jesus had just spent the weekend entering Jerusalem on a stolen donkey, receiving the adoration of the crowds, cursing a fig tree, and slinging a whip around the temple to cleanse it of corruption. In other words, he just spent the weekend making holy trouble ... what former US Representative John Lewis would have called "good trouble, necessary trouble." Because of this "good trouble ... necessary trouble," the Temple's religious establishment was furious with Jesus. They couldn't believe this itinerant preacher's nerve. The chief priests and elders were saying, "Who the hell does he think he is?"

Let me offer some background context: The priests in ancient Judaism were all descendants of Moses' older brother Aaron. You could be a descendant of Aaron and not be a priest, but you could not be a priest without tracing your ancestry to Aaron. That was true in the Temple from the time of the return from the Babylonian Exile ... about 538 BCE ... until the Maccabean revolt ... about one hundred fifty years before Jesus. At that point, another family ... claiming a

different priestly ancestry ... collaborated with the Roman occupying government to overthrow the existing priestly order ... the descendants of Aaron ... and insert themselves in the leadership roles. These chief priests were in cahoots with the Roman government, and between the two entities ... Rome and the Temple ... they exploited the people through government taxes and Temple tithes.

Thus, in the time of Jesus, the chief priests and elders were seen by many as illegitimate, and they were using their position in the Temple to reward themselves. It was these chief priest and elders who confronted Jesus, and they demanded to know just who he thought he was: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

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

The chief priests and elders knew that if they admitted that John the Baptist was a prophet sent by God, Jesus would ask them why they rejected John's teaching. At the same time, they knew that if they said John was nothing more than a self-deluded charlatan, the crowds ... who loved John ... would turn on them. So, they refused to answer the question.

This is when Jesus pulled out the story of the father and his two sons ... and concluded the story with the zinger that further incensed his accusers, and just about guaranteed his crucifixion five days later. Jesus told the chief priests and elders that they were like the second son in the story. They talked the talk ... they made lofty promises ... they spoke fluent God-talk. But, when John came and offered them the good news of a new life of wholeness, they refused to act ... they refused to do the actual work of God.

Meanwhile, the people whom the chief priests and elders deemed the worst sinners ... the tax collectors and the prostitutes ... what about them? Jesus said they were 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 had not been particularly pious. Recognizing their own helplessness, hopelessness, and immorality, they flocked to the wilderness in search of the divine presence of God in their lives ... and not in the stone walls of the Temple.

Yet even then ... even when the chief priest and elders saw countless others embracing this life-changing authenticity ... they refused to change their minds. So, Jesus told them that the prostitutes and tax collectors ... the people at the bottom of the high priests and elders religious hierarchy of goodness and badness ... those tax collectors and prostitutes had come to know more about a faithful, God-filled life than the chief priests and elders ever would.

It is worth noting here that the people who flocked to John and to Jesus were the people who had no other legs to stand on. They were desperate. They recognized the enormity of their own needs, hungers, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities. They knew that they could never attain holiness on their own.

To be clear, what Jesus called out when he “cleansed” the temple and infuriated the elders was not Judaism or its various forms of worship ... Jesus was deeply embedded in his Jewish faith. Instead, Jesus was challenging a system of exploitation by way of excessive tithes and taxes that blocked access to the divine ... that literally kept the bodies of the poor outside the gates of the Temple, forcing them into more and endless debt before they could approach and worship God.

What Jesus opposed through the story of the father and the two sons was all forms of religion that stop at empty words. Jesus resisted all forms of piety that didn’t move people into the world of deep spiritual fulfillment, and concrete action on behalf of justice, mercy, equality, love, and compassion.

Again, this is not just a story that happened two thousand years ago. It is a story for us as well. We are invited to a deeper life with the divine presence of God living in us. But we cannot do this if we keep our faith lives tethered to abstractions. If we live a faith that is intellectual without also living one of the flesh, that faith will be empty. After all, it is with our bodies that we experience pain, anger, terror, and joy ... it’s my chest that hurts when I mourn ... it’s my face that burns when I’m angry ... it’s my whole body that warms with pleasure when I’m joyous. The fact is that our faith is meant to be embodied ... to be incarnate ... to be organic ... to be active. In the realm of God, words ... even the most beautiful words ... are just not enough.

I’m going to end my sermon this morning by reading a portion of an essay that appeared in the New York Times on Friday. It is written by David Brooks who is a regular on the Opinion Page of the Times. The piece was titled “How Faith Shapes My Politics.”

When I was a kid, I was raised, like most people in our culture, on certain stories: Moses leading the Israelites out of oppression, little David slaying Goliath, Ruth swearing loyalty to Naomi.

During my decades as an atheist, I thought the stories were false but the values they implied were true. These values — welcome the stranger, humility against pride — became the moral framework I applied to think through my opinions, to support various causes. Like a lot of atheists, I found the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr very helpful.

About seven years ago I realized that my secular understanding was not adequate to the amplitude of life as I experienced it. There were extremes of joy and pain, spiritual fullness and spiritual emptiness that were outside the normal material explanations of things.

I was gripped by the conviction that the people I encountered were not skin bags of DNA, but had souls; had essences with no size or shape, but that gave them infinite value and

dignity. The conviction that people have souls led to the possibility that there was some spirit who breathed souls into them.

What finally did the trick was glimpses of infinite goodness. Secular religions are really good at identifying some evils, like oppression, and building a moral system against them. Divine religions are primarily oriented to an image of pure goodness, pure loving kindness, holiness. In periodic glimpses of radical goodness — in other people, in sensations of the transcendent — I felt, as Wendell Berry put it, “knowledge crawl over my skin.” The biblical stories from Genesis all the way through Luke and John became living presences in my life.

These realizations transformed my spiritual life: awareness of God’s love, participation in grace, awareness that each person is made in God’s image. Faith offered an image of a way of being, an ultimate allegiance.

The story of the two sons is not a parable. It was a challenge to the chief priests and elders of the Temple in Jerusalem during the last week of Jesus’ life. It was Jesus speaking truth to power. Yet it is also a challenge to us today. Yes, we are the faithful that follow Jesus. Nevertheless, how often do we say “Yes” to the intellectual framework of our institutional faith, and fail to nurture our hearts and souls to accept the divine presence that can transform our spiritual life. Maybe that is why Jesus went to John in the wilderness to be baptized.

In that part of our psyche where faith resides we have two sons. One says “yes,” but never acts. The other resists, but, in the end, gets the job done. Jesus spoke truth to the powers of the Temple two thousand years ago. He is still speaking truth to the powers of our own psyche today.

Amen.