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Matthew 21:23-32

I used to be afraid of church.

I admitted this one day to a dear friend.

“I believe in God,” I told him,
“and I don’t know what to do about that.”

He offered a suggestion.

“You could go to church.”

I considered it.

For about 15 seconds.

Before telling him
that no, I couldn’t.

I couldn't go to church, I told him,
until I figured out what I believed.

He was very patient with me.

“Uh-huh,” he replied.

“Or, just a thought
you could go to church to help you figure out
what you believe.

That's one of the things that church
is really good at.”

I was unconvinced.

I was an academic: a professor.

I'd spent my life in a world that values expertise:
where being good meant having the right answers.

And I assumed that church worked the same way:
that people who were good at church
had the right answers about church.

And me?

I still had studying to do.

I had been running from church,
trying to evade a persistent belief in God,
for more than thirty years.

I had been hiding out deep
in a spiritual wilderness.

And so I was pretty confident that I would not pass
the entrance exam I believed
waited for me inside the doors of church.

So I stayed away for a few more years.

As you may have guessed, I did eventually
muster the courage to enter a church.

And I quickly learned that I was wrong
about a LOT of what
I thought I knew about church.

For one, there was no entrance exam.

There were answers, yes,
but mostly what I found in church
were people asking *questions*,
people open to be changed by the answers they found,
people committed to the *world*
being changed.

That willingness to be changed
is at the heart of where Jesus leads us
in today's Gospel lesson.

We find Jesus in Jerusalem,
arguing with the authorities about authority.

His own.

This is an ongoing theme in Matthew's Gospel:
that Jesus' authority to teach, to heal,
is recognized by everyone but the authorities.

That theme is speeding towards resolution here,
the day after Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem
for the first time, as Matthew tells it.

His arrival has initiated
a series of confrontations
with the authorities that will culminate,
a few days hence, with his arrest and crucifixion.

All of that is to say:
this is a high-stakes debate.

Where today's Gospel lesson begins,
Jesus has returned to Jerusalem
after spending the night in Bethany.

The chief priests and elders
are waiting for him in the Temple.

The discussion that ensues
boils down to this.

Who is authentically speaking
the word of God?

Jesus' response – answering
their question with a question of his own -
isn't an attempt to change the subject.

He's answering them by pointing
to John the Baptist and through John
to the entire prophetic tradition:
to the long line of people who spoke God's truth
to authorities who seldom wanted to hear it
but who ignored it at their own peril.

It's an edgy answer, to say the least.

And when they reply to his question
with an unconvincing "we don't know,"
he answers them with a parable.

The basic premise of the parable
may sound familiar
to anyone who has been
a parent or a child.

Dad comes in and asks for some help
with some chores out in the vineyard.

Kid number one stretched out comfortably
on the couch doing nothing, rolls his eyes
and says “can’t you see
I’m in the middle of something?”

Kid number two says
“sure, happy to,” and then starts playing X-Box
and forgets the conversation ever happened.

Kid number one, meanwhile,
has a change of heart
and goes and does the thing after all.

So, the question to the elders and the priests is:
which son did the father’s will?

The answer’s kind of obvious.

And the authorities get Jesus' question right:
the first son ultimately did the will of the father.

And in getting it right, the priests and elders reveal
what they've gotten wrong.

They knew the right answer.
But they weren't living it.

They knew what a person
should do on hearing
a prophetic word: *listen, react, be changed*.

Like the first son.

Jesus makes clear, then,
that they *also* know
what they should have done
when they heard John the Baptist preach.

“even after you saw it, you did not
change your minds and believe him,”
Jesus says to them.

As much as they knew
about the rules of pious living,
they were farther from the kingdom of God
than tax collectors and prostitutes:
folks who maybe didn’t have it all figured out
but who listened.

Who let themselves be changed.

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It’s easy, hearing this parable,
to fault the authorities –
to call out ... their hypocrisy.

And to be sure, calling out the hypocrisy
of those in power is an important part
of Jesus’s work and of ours.

But this parable also calls us
to look at ourselves.

This is a disruptive story.

It's meant to disturb the comfortable.

It very uncomfortably calls us
to ask ourselves whether we
are just hearing Jesus's words,
letting them slide on through us,
or whether we are letting them
inhabit us, *change* us,
get us up off of whatever comfortable
spiritual couch we're relaxing on.

Matthew poses this question
in the language of the kingdom of God.

In Matthew's Gospel, the Kingdom of God
is not a distant place away from here.

It's not heaven, up in the clouds.

And it's not even a specific, discrete time, really.

It's more a description of the world as it ought to be:

the world as it *will* be when God's will

as revealed through Jesus Christ is done:

the world in which justice

and true righteousness prevail,

the gloriously upside-down world

that Jesus proclaims:

the one where mourners are blessed,

mercy has the last word,

and the least of us is greatest.

It's the world to which
we draw near whenever we do
the work of Jesus:
the work of justice, of healing,
the work of transforming the world
as we ourselves continue to be transformed.

Kingdom work.

This parable points us out into the vineyard,
at that work that God, through Christ,
calls us to do.

What does it mean in our own lives, then,
for us to be the first son?

That's the question we're left to wrestle with:
how are Jesus's words trying to change me?

Where am I maybe a little bit
too comfortable?

The answer's going to be different
for each of us.

I've been thinking a lot, this week,
about what this parable is asking of me
in the context of this moment,
and the kingdom work that lies ahead of us
here and now.

I hear it in terms of racial justice
and the gap between this world we inhabit
and the just world that God wills.

This parable asks me:
How do I, as a white person,
need to change to live
in a way that advances that kind of justice?

In what ways am I hearing today's calls
for righteousness and racial justice
and, like the second son, leaning back
in the comfort of my privilege and failing to act?

And I hear it in terms of climate change
and the gap between this burning, thawing world
and the harmony and integrity of creation that God wills.

How do I, as an American consumer,
need to change to move us closer
to that world?

In what ways am I hearing the call
for systemic changes in how we live on this planet
and, like the second son, turning away
back to my life of material comfort, failing to act?

Yes, this parable issues a challenge
to hypocritical and corrupt authority.

And it demands
that I get my own house in order.

And the questions it asks
are not ones we can answer once
and be done with.

They're the work of a lifetime.
The *hard* work of a lifetime.

But the parable also offers good news.
Jesus lands on *change*.

That's astonishing, really.

The good news of this parable
is that we don't have to get it right the first time.

The parable seems to assume
that we won't: there's no third child
in this parable who had it all figured out.

There are just different versions
of getting it wrong.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes
didn't have it all figured out.

But they listened to John.

And they let themselves be changed
by what they heard.

That mattered more to Jesus
than whatever they were doing before.

Artist and theologian Jan Richardson writes
that the vineyard in this parable
is a place of God's wild grace.

This is a demanding story,
and it's a story full of grace:
the grace that changes us,
that equips us to do the work
of bringing about God's kingdom on this earth.

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Our path is that of the first son.

The one who listens.

And then changes his mind.

And gets up and gets to work.

Kingdom work.

And no, it's not an easy path.

Change never is.

But friends, we don't walk it alone.

That's something church is really good at, too.

Walking hard roads together.

We walk this one together.

And we walk it with God,

by whose grace we are changed.

The theologian Walter Brueggemann puts it this way.

What matters, he says,

“is not that we have this hard work to do.

The news is that God is at work

and we are being transformed, being acted upon,

being addressed, cared for, suffered over,

bothered by the very power and purpose of God.”

And thanks be to God for that.

Amen.