

## Proper 21A: Authority

Preached on Sunday, September 28, 2008

The parable of the two brothers is one of those where it helps to know the context in which Jesus told the story. So before we try to unpack it, I want to set the scene a little more for you.

The setting is a hard one. Just a day or so before this interaction in the temple Jesus had entered into Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” So this parable is told during the peak of the whole story – the point at which Jesus had a following, He was being hailed as king, the tensions around him had risen just about to the breaking point, and the questions from religious leaders reflected those tension they were coming at him with a new intensity even a bit of a threat. And all of this took place around the Passover in Jerusalem – so the city and the temple was packed – the Roman authorities were on high alert and the religious leaders were looking to put their best face forward, to make all appearances of being a calm and peaceful people so that they wouldn’t suffer at the hands of the secular authorities that ruled over them. And not only all of that – one Matthew says that the first thing that Jesus did when he entered Jerusalem, so the day before the story we just heard, Jesus visited the temple too. And on that visit he turned over the tables of those who exchanged money and sold the sacrificial doves all the while quoting from Jeremiah who prophesied the destruction of the temple. No surprise perhaps that a few days after this story took place Jesus was put on trial and crucified.

So the setting wasn't just Jesus sitting on the hillside telling a story to whomever might hear. The stakes were much higher than that and the story was much more directed than that and in some ways you can't blame the temple leaders for their question. "Who do you think you are?" they asked Jesus, "By what authority do you do these things?" Given all that's on their minds – the holy days – the crowds – the cost of keeping the temple – the Roman soldiers breathing down their necks – the rumors of this peasant leader who was preaching and healing and forgiving and being hailed as Messiah by some of their people. That was undeniably a lot of pressure for the chief priests and elders and so their question was legit – they wanted to know who had given this guy the right to come in and completely disrupt the temple scene during what was in their minds anyway the worst possible time for something like that to happen.

And so they asked and then Jesus did what Jesus had been doing all along, and (just for the record) he had learned this method from the chief priests and elders themselves. He responded to their question with more questions. First he asked *them* a "can't win" about John the Baptist. They caught that they couldn't possibly answer that one safely so the chief priests and elders responded with a relatively wise "We don't know." And then Jesus tried again. "Well, what do you think?" he asked them. And then, he told them a story and it went like this. A man had two sons and he went to both of them and told them to go work in the fields. And the first son said he wouldn't go, but then later he changed his mind and did go and work. The second son, however, told his father that he would go into the fields but he never did. "So which of these two sons," Jesus asked them, "did the will of their father?"

And unlike some parables this one had an easy answer: “The first one,” they said. Which is obvious, right? It wasn’t what each son said that had mattered it was each son eventually did that mattered. And maybe for a moment or two there was some relief on the scene. The chief priests and elders had answered correctly so maybe this rebellious, so-called Messiah would key it down for a while and at least let them get through the week. Here they were on common ground after all, agreeing to the interpretation of this parable. Maybe the difficulties were over. But Jesus wasn’t done yet; he continued the conversation taking more steps as told them that while that they (the chief priests and elders) were actually the second brother in the story. And you gotta bet that wasn’t how they had heard it. Jesus was telling them right to their faces that the chief priests and elders were the ones who said the right things, but weren’t doing the work God was asking them to do.

And then just to make it worse (or better depending on your perspective) Jesus added one final piece – he said that the tax collectors and prostitutes – the most sinful of the sinful – the most outcast of the outcast – the most despised and least religious among them – would go into heaven ahead of them (not instead of them – but ahead of them.) And that was enough to send the chief priests and elders over the edge. And probably enough – given everything else that was happening – it was probably enough to send Jesus to the cross.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that on one level this is another story about basic hypocrisy which she calls “the number one charge leveled against religious people – that we say one thing and do another, promising we’ll love one another on Sunday” and then slipping down that slippery slope as soon as we leave the pews. There are some very obvious examples we could all give of how we and even easier to say how “they” profess their faith but then go out and live in ways

completely contrary to what they say they believe. We hear this all the time often in sweeping generalizations, “Christians say this but they do this.” Usually it tends towards a knock against the ‘Thems’ whoever they are.

But Taylor says it’s even more important to look at the unconscious ways many of us substitute our beliefs about God for our obedience to God. And I think she’s right. To some extent we’re all guilty of this. Just take a minute or two and consider every day life. How many of you have thought about visiting or calling to or even sending a card to someone here at Grace or another friend who is hurting in some sort of way or who could just use a “Hey, we’re thinking about you,” sort of kindness. And how many of you have gone so far as to look up the address or the phone number or even gone so far as to buy the card but then not take any of those steps? Or how many of you believe in protecting the environment yet drive lots and lots of miles every day some necessary but others trips not so necessary? Or how many of you even though you have bags that are re-usable you forget them at home or in your car and so you have your groceries packed week after week in those plastic bags that will sit for generations in landfills refusing to decompose. Now I happened to have chosen a list that I am guilty of, just so you know that I am not preaching with you not at you. And (just for the record) it’s probably not a surprise, that’s not the end of my list – but you get the point and you can probably either come up with your own or find yourself in there somewhere.

The point is that all of us live with some sort of gap between what we believe and what we do -- and this parable is a very challenging reminder that what we do matters. And not only for the long-term outcome but because I think that on some level that gap eats at us every day and tears us up a bit. It affects us inside and it affects our friendships and families and communities and earth when we say one

thing and do another – when we say love and do indifference – when we say right and do wrong when we say “I will go” and we don’t. Taylor says it like this, “There is not a creed or a mission statement in the world that is worth one visit to a sick friend, or one cup of water held out to someone who is longing for it.” And Jesus felt it was so important to get this message across that he risked his life in order to challenge those who were the most publically guilty of perpetuating the sin.

My guess is that especially among the religious there never has been and never will be a lack of people who are willing to say the right thing or believe the right thing. What Jesus said was that we need more people who will do the right thing. Love your neighbor? Help to care for neighbor. Give thanks for the goodness of creation? Take a bag to the store. Pray for the healing of a friend? Visit or call the friend. You continue the list – it goes on and on and it runs through your life and my life and the life we share as community of Grace Church. May we remember that according to the story of these brothers - as important as our voices are, it’s not just the words we say but how we live our lives that matters most.

Amen.