

Sunday, September 27, 2020

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Matthew 21:23-32

To Face the Truth

INTRODUCTION

To understand the full impact of today's Gospel reading from Matthew, we need to recap the tense drama that took place the day before. Yesterday, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem; the epicenter of Israel's political and spiritual power. The city was teeming with Jewish pilgrims who traveled here to celebrate the Passover. Jesus does *not* make a quiet entrance. In fact, he colorfully dramatizes the well-known, ancient prophecy about how the Messiah will appear by riding into the holy city on a donkey. This symbolic street performance is not lost on the crowd. They quickly swarm around him and begin to shout, "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" More and more people line the streets leading to the Temple. Matthew reports that "the whole city was in turmoil¹." But Jesus isn't finished. He arrives at the temple and immediately throws a fit, driving out the vendors who were set up at the front gate. Now there is room for those who have come for healing and to listen to Jesus teach. As the unruly crowd occupies the temple, the chanting grows louder. "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Now you can imagine that the chief priests and temple authorities are outraged. They are seething. This public adoration of Jesus, proclaiming him as Messiah, is nothing less than blasphemy! But the crowds appear on the brink of exploding, so they retreat into the temple and strategize an alternative plan. This action of civil disobedience must be squashed quickly. But how?

The following day, the tension is high in the over-crowded temple. The religious leaders have put every guard on high alert. The temple elders are ready for Jesus and determined to put this blasphemous imposter in his place.

Hear this reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 21, verses 23 through 32...

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 18:21-35

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?" 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. 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?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard

¹ Matthew 21:1-10

John as a prophet." 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.

"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?" 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. 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.

SERMON

Dear Jesus, when you came to reveal the fullness of God's love and found only resistance and trouble. Instead of embrace you were ridiculed, demonized and slandered. Help us to hear the message you came to give and give us insight into how to respond to your Gospel today. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN

Have you ever watched what they call "reality TV"? These are mostly game shows that involve real people who agree to be thrown into extraordinary, often ridiculous circumstances. The goal for the producers is to create a tense dramatic contest. I produced some of them prior to being called into ministry and I can tell you first hand, these shows are far from reality. I remember on the door of one of the edit bays hung a sign that said, "reality is what we say it is." What a brilliant, all be it cynical statement. Reality is what we say it is. Reality TV shows go to great lengths to ensure that what "reality" comes out of that edit room is explosive. We want a tense drama. Our job was to carefully craft the story we wanted and we did. The viewers easily accepted our manipulated fiction as reality! In television, advertising and politics, the goal is always to appeal to people's emotion. Actual facts and the honest, objective truth have no place in the pursuit of higher ratings, increased sales or stronger public approval. The truth often gets in the way.

Today it has got to the point where sociologists are saying that we are in the post-truth era. In fact, in 2016 the Oxford Dictionary even named the word "post-truth" as *word of the year*. They defined post-truth as "Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".

Somehow, in this post-truth era, we have lost any sense of shared objective standards for what is true. Opinions, beliefs, emotional conviction and flat-out-lies are all

blended into this muddy concoction that we willingly consume and then take our stand and stick to it. Reality is what we say it is.

It's all centered in our emotional desire to be right, we need to feed the insatiable craving for certainty. We long for validation of our particular world view and to be affirmed in our righteous resentments toward "the other".

For those looking for more power and worldly success, objective facts have never been useful. And so, truth becomes subservient to lies and at some point, the lies, situational ethics, and cleverly crafted misinformation serve as easily digestible reinforcement to prop up our emotional certainty. It *feels* good. To change our minds at this point is to risk facing the truth that we were wrong. No one comes willingly to this existential crisis.

I have no doubt that Jesus knew exactly what he was walking into on day two in the holy city. Everyone knew he was in Jerusalem and his approval ratings were soaring, but with the wrong kind of people; the tax collectors, prostitutes, fisherman, the sick and disabled. These are the people who were pressing in to him, desperate to hear his message of acceptance, forgiveness and healing. But for those in comfortable and privileged power positions, they had no need for what he was offering. In fact, the truth that Jesus was teaching was a major threat. To them it appeared that Jesus was disrespecting their historic institution and more than once he publicly insulted the leaders of their nicely organized religious tradition. They had invested their lives to maintain and protect a system that, for them, seemed to work quite well. And now this strange cult leader rides into their holy city on a donkey and upsets the delicate balance of their law and order. So, they go on the attack, publicly calling Jesus out. The religious leaders want credentials, pedigrees and diplomas. "You and your followers don't belong here." Today they intend to unmask this charlatan. "By what authority?" they demand.

Jesus does not take the bait. Instead, he quickly turns the tables on them and they are caught in their own rhetorical trap. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Oh snap! They don't know what to say! Jesus seizes the moment to tell a short but pointed story...

A man tells his sons to go work in the vineyard. One refuses but later changes his mind and goes out to work the land. The second son agrees to go but never does. Jesus asks, "which of the two did the will of his father?" The answer appears to be quite obvious. "The one who changed his mind," they exclaim. Exactly! This is

precisely what chief priest and elders cannot do. These men are convinced of their virtue. No one disputes their goodness. Also, they profit from the status quo which makes it even harder to recognize the truth.

The truth that Jesus points to is that their privilege and comfort is built on calculated lies, hypocrisy and systemic oppression. He offers them a chance to change their minds but this is all beyond their comprehension. They have no problem with the way things are. The system seems to work fine for them. To change would mean risking their orderly and comfortable lifestyle. Their personal integrity would be questioned and their authority as elders diminished. To change their minds would mean humiliation and the end of life as they know it. That is terrifying and fear leads to anger and anger leads to hate and these men were terrified, angry and boiling over with hate. They had a lot to lose.

In the coming days they would unleash that hate in an all-out attack of legal maneuvering, false testimony, character assassination, and misinformation. Their campaign would lead to his execution and I'm sure they thought they had won.

In our post-truth era, reality and truth is whatever the internet and twitter feed say it is. Anyone with a screen name and internet connection can convincingly pervert the truth for all to see. So, let me ask you, what truths are influencing you? NPR? MSNBC? CNN? FOX? NYT? What certainties are you holding that you might you want to reconsider? What is our perception of reality that perhaps is blinding us to God's truth? I think a good start to navigating the way through the post-truth era is to notice what frightens you. What are you afraid of losing? Pray for wisdom and humility to know, because it is not self-evident. The tax collectors and prostitutes knew. They could easily find their confession. They *knew* what they had done, and Jesus said come. The sick and infirmed, they were outcasts and had nothing left to lose, and Jesus said come. For most of us it is a lot harder. But if we are to take this Gospel seriously, we must face the truth that perhaps we are wrong. What would the consequences be if we are?

But this is the good news of the Gospel. The vineyard still needs tending and the gate is always open. To change our mind may very well mean risking our personal comfort, jeopardizing our status and relinquishing privilege, but when we have the courage to truly face the truth of what is right and what is wrong, it is then that Jesus says to us as well, come. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear the good news and eternal truth of the Gospel. AMEN