

WHOM DO YOU FOLLOW? Matthew 21: 23-32

Dr. Phil, one of America's most renowned TV's psychologists, was once asked who he would most like to interview. He said, "Jesus Christ. I would really like to interview Jesus Christ. I would like to have a conversation with him about the meaning of life."

Really! Just read today's text from Matthew and you probably would realize that isn't really such a great idea. It seems like when Jesus is treated like an interviewee, in no time flat, he turns the table on the interviewer, and he will end up doing the interviewing! In the process your whole world gets turned upside down and inside out like a dirty sweatshirt in the laundry basket. He will probably trip you up, and before you know it, he will be telling you to sell that truck of yours and ask you to give all the profit from the sale to West End Food Pantry or some other charity. Interviewing Jesus has a way of not turning out the way you would expect it to.

Conversations with Jesus can be difficult. But the religious leaders in today's gospel lesson are upset—rightfully so. Jesus came riding into Jerusalem. There was much fan fare—a large crowd surrounded him and there were shouts of Hosanna and Son of David—a term for the Messiah. The crowd was treating him like a visiting King and honored guest. Then, he immediately comes to the temple and gets his pants all twisted up in a wad. He loses it; he has a conniption fit—he turns the money changers booths upside down—money goes scattering everywhere—quarters are falling all over the stone floor and dollar bills are floating in the air. He turns the animal sellers' booths upside down—pigeons escaped, and their feathers are flying about. They are probably popping all over everyone's heads in fear. Goats are on the loose and sheep are bleating in all the commotion. What a mess.

Now, it is the next day and the leaders want to know just who Jesus thinks he is coming into their temple and upsetting the apple cart. How dare he condemn them and the way they run things? They want to know who gives him such authority! They have the right to ask too. They are the ones with the M. Div. degrees from Princeton and the doctorates from Harvard. They have all the education and the family tree to give them the authority to run things. Just who does this young upstart from a small country village think he is? So, they ask, "By what authority are you doing these things?" I doubt it was asked nicely either. They did have a right to know after all. They were the ones in charge.

Imagine that St. Matthews gets a brand-new pastor. One Saturday early in his ministry, he comes in with a few friends and takes out all the pews, removes the pulpit, lectern, and altar, and then gets rid of the organ. The brass cross and candlesticks disappears along with the fancy chandeliers. In their place he puts rocking chairs in a big circle, then a circle of other comfortable chairs and a circle of bean bag chairs for the kids towards the center. He puts a kitchen table in the center and makes sure there is room for an electric keyboard, guitar, bass, drums and since it is a country church a fiddle and a banjo. There is a harmonica and kazoo close by as well. He has ripped out the pretty carpet and put in a large oval rag rug. Floor lamps are scattered around the back and quilts now decorate the walls. There is a corner with baskets of toys and coloring books for the kids and another corner for the youth to play board games. This new pastor even brought his dogs with him and they are sleeping under the table in the center of the sanctuary. How would you feel about such a radical change? At our Bible study on Monday we even talked about the controversy between having pews and chairs in a church sanctuary.

My guess is a few of you would love it, but the powers that be—not so much. (By the way, a small dying church in Appalachia did just what I described and is no longer dying). The Council members most likely would not be happy that this young upstart pastor went and changed things so radically without their consent. They would have a legitimate concern too, according to our polity. They were the ones to make the major decisions—and really big decisions must be made by the congregation according to UCC polity. The church had elected them and promised to trust their authority. The council has the authority to ask this young new pastor by who's authority did he do these things?

The religious leaders' question in the gospel lesson was meant to trap Jesus—to give them ammunition against him. If he said by God's authority—they could then accuse him of blasphemy. If he claimed that he has his own authority, he didn't have the political power or clout to back it up. So, Jesus does the next best thing—a very rabbinical thing—he answers their question with another question. “Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?” Now they are trapped in the question. If they said heaven, well, they are in trouble because they didn't follow John. If they say human origin, the people would be furious because many believed John was a great prophet. They were stuck! So, they said, “We don't know.”

The interviewer became the interviewee. Jesus turned their world upside down. He outwits them, but in the process, he also unmasks their real fears. They are afraid of losing power. They don't want things to change—they like things the way they are. The powers would not really care much about Jesus, his ministry, or his authority if Jesus didn't threaten their own power and authority. But it does—so they resist him. They like their privileged world; they fear anything that would disrupt it—even if the disruption is from God.

You think that would end the whole confrontation, but no...not Jesus. He keeps on going. He tells them a parable about two sons. The first son was sitting on the couch with his Xbox remote in his hand playing his new Assassin's Creed 2020 video game. The second son was sitting in a recliner chair with his laptop and his cell phone in his hand tweeting to his friends while he searched the internet for new shoes. His Dad was planning on doing some work outside—the grass needed mowing, the weeds needed to be weed-wacked. A small tree was dead and needed to be cut down and chopped up for firewood and the bushes all needed trimming. So, the Father asked both of his teenage sons to come out and help. The first son complained and said he cut the grass last week and he needed a day to rest. He said no. Then the second son said, “Sure Dad” just let me finish up what I am doing, and I'll come help.

Well, 30 minutes later, both sons are still sitting down, but the first son, the one playing the video games looks out and sees his Dad working hard in the yard. He realizes that his Dad had worked hard all week and he knew his Dad's back was bothering him. He feels guilty and now feels sorry for telling his Dad no. He gets up off the couch, turns off the Xbox and heads out to the shed for work gloves and begins to help his Dad outside. The second son, however, (the one who said he would help) never glances outside and never gives a second thought about his Father's hard work week or request for help. He just keeps sending instagrams to his friends and surfing the net for new football cleats. He never goes outside to help. So, which one did the will of his Dad? ...

Well, the elders and council members knew the answer—the first son, they replied. The one who said no but ended up going out to work with their father. The one whose actions spoke volumes.

Then Jesus says something to the council members and religious leaders that really bothered them. He told them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors (the scum of the earth in Jesus'

day—they were Jews who colluded with Rome and robbed a fortune from their fellow neighbors) and prostitutes (those who sin by selling their own bodies for profit) are going to the Kingdom ahead of you.

Now, you know that would really anger and rile these leaders. This whole conversation started with the religious leaders asking Jesus whom he got his authority from, but it ended with Jesus turning their world inside out. How could the sinners get into the kingdom before the religious leaders? They must have felt like they were in the mirror house at a carnival looking at themselves in one of the funky mirrors that makes you all distorted—nothing looked right.

The parable is an indictment against those who didn't repent of their sin and turn to God—follow God. The first son realized the error of his ways. He repented and got off the couch and got to work for his Dad. The sinners and tax collectors are the first son—they may not have been on board at first, but they are the ones who repented their evil ways and got off their duffs and went to work for the kingdom. The religious leaders are the second son—the ones who said yes to God first, but then failed to show their devotion to God in their life. They got stuck and failed in the end. They showed no sign of living a righteous life.

The main point of this text is authority. Whose instructions do we obey? In our epistle lesson, Paul encourages Christians to emulate Jesus' leadership. We are to be of the same mind as Jesus—and his leadership style was evident in humility and self-emptying.

This text begs us to ask ourselves, to whom do we listen? Whose guidance do we heed? Who do we follow and who do we refuse to follow? Does Jesus have authority over us and if so, how can others see that in our lives. Do we walk the walk, or do we just talk the talk? Do we obey God's commandments? Do we support those in authority who obey God's commandments? Is righteousness a quality we strive for in our lives and expect of those in positions of authority? What is righteousness according to Matthew? It's actually pretty simple—John and Jesus both announce that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. We are to repent of our sin, turn from evil and turn to God. Those who work to do this throughout their lives are those who live righteous lives. Leaders who reflect righteousness are servant leaders. Those who put the needs of others before themselves and their own egos, desires, and needs. Sadly, they are a rare find these days.

Where are you in this gospel reading today? Are you one of the religious leaders upset that a young upstart preacher turned their temple upside down? Are you a worshiper who is standing on the sideline observing and not sure if you want to get involved? Are you the first son in the parable who repents his past wrongs and changes his way? Or are you the son who says, "Yes, I will help, I'll be an active member, I'll take part," but then never really does?

We all have to decide this for ourselves. However...I did find some very comforting good news towards the end of the gospel text. Jesus did tell the religious leaders that the sinners would get to the Kingdom ahead of them. But the religious leaders still get there...the leaders are not excluded from the Kingdom—they just arrive a little later.

Thanks be to God!

The Rev. Suzanne Brooks-Cope, September 27, 2020