

***Proper 21 – SJ – Your Mind, Christ's Mind***

*Matthew 21:23-32 September 25, 2011*

*St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT*

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On a Galilean road near Caesarea Philippi came the question that has haunted Jesus' followers ever since it was asked – and still haunts us today: “But who do **you** say that I am?” It was certainly important to the disciples who were there to hear him ask the question, but it is at least as important to us today. Both New Testament readings this morning seek to answer the question – at least indirectly. There's a reason that it was difficult for Paul and Matthew to articulate an answer in any kind of logical way. Jesus was unlike any other human being they had encountered – either directly as a disciple or through Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, or indirectly, through the stories that circulated about him. We today have just as serious a problem, but for a different reason: we have heard so much about him, and so many interpretations, that we are likely to start out with already digested assumptions about the nature of Jesus' relationship to God the Father on the one hand and to humans on the other – assumptions that we put into words every time we recite one of the classic creeds of our religion.

Paul exhorts his readers to let the same mind be in them “that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” In essence, what Paul is saying is that Jesus could have appeared to us as God himself (at least, perhaps, out of a burning bush), but chose instead to be one of us – Emanuel (that is, *God with us*). And if Christ is actually human, he is not only Lord, as Paul goes on to call him, but an example to us of what we, also human, are called to be, if we can in fact have the same mind in us that he had in him. We are called to be more, much more, than we would be on our own.

In Matthew's gospel, the chief priests and elders have just witnessed one of the most important events of Christ's ministry on earth. He has overturned the tables in the temple courtyard and driven the moneychangers away. And they ask him: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” I read the other day that Dr. Phil was once asked what person, living or dead, he'd like to interview. His answer was Jesus, because, he said, he'd like to ask him about the meaning of life, which provoked the one writing about this response, Charles Campbell, professor of homiletics at Duke Divinity school, to observe: “Oh no, you wouldn't! You would not want to sit down with Jesus, treat him like an interviewee, and ask him about the meaning of life. You would be crazy to do that. He would turn you upside down and inside out. He would confound all your questions and probably end up telling you to sell everything you own, give the money to the poor, and come, follow me. No Dr. Phil, you do not really want to interview Jesus, and I do not want to either. It would not go well.”

So here, in this passage, when the elders ask him by what authority he can attack the customs of the temple, does Jesus attempt to justify himself? No! In essence he turns

more tables – this time on them, answering their question with one of his own, regarding his cousin, John the Baptist. Was John’s baptism from heaven or of “human origin”? They can’t very well say “from heaven,” since they have rejected John and his message. But if they say “human,” they are going to alienate the many listeners in the crowd around them who *have* heard John’s message and taken it to heart. So they are stuck. They can’t answer Jesus. Which leaves Jesus free to simply assume the authority that they are not able to deny him, as he goes on to ask them the second of his questions, this time imbedded in a little parable.

A father, one who clearly *does* have authority, asks his two sons to go into their vineyard to work one day. The first, one who presumably has something else a bit more fun to do that day, tells his father that he won’t go to the vineyard, but later, apparently thinking better of it, regardless of how burdensome he may consider the job, no matter how much he really doesn’t want to have to do it, changes his mind and does what his father has asked him to do. The other gives a quick “Sure, I’ll go.” But then he doesn’t actually go to the vineyard and do anything. Which son does the will of his father, Jesus asks? The answer to which is so obvious that even the elders get it right: the one who actually gets his hands dirty in the vineyard.

When Jesus then follows the story up with his observation that the tax collectors and prostitutes, who heard what John had to say, and did something about it, are going to enter God’s kingdom ahead of the elders, it’s kind of evident that he is asserting that the real authority comes from himself, since John, you will recall, had announced as he baptized people that the one coming after him – that is, Jesus, whose sandals he was not worthy to carry – would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

So what is the point of the parable? Well, let’s put ourselves in the place of those two sons. It’s easy enough to identify ourselves as Christians – as followers of the one who came to save us. It’s easy enough to proclaim: “I’m a follower, Lord!” But remember that earlier in Matthew’s gospel Jesus is quoted as saying: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” Actions truly do speak louder than words, for nothing is accomplished without them. Let’s face it though: many of us are loathe to disappoint others, or to look bad, and consequently are far too likely to say “yes” to any request that comes down the pike, regardless of our hesitancy to actually do what has been requested of us – either because we feel ill-equipped to do it, or, as so often happens, we just feel overburdened with commitments that we’ve made already, or we’re frankly just too lazy to do it, or even that we just plain forget – and, for whatever reason, we simply don’t follow through. Haven’t we all been in that situation at one time or other? I know I have.

But if we truly care about the world or the communities we live in, or the churches we attend, or our families, even if we are like the son who goes to the vineyard even though he prefers not doing it, or feels over-committed, we’ll pitch in and do what has to be done. In a way, this story is also a meditation on the two dominant types of understanding of what Christianity is all about. One looks at Jesus and regards what he did on the cross as a means to lift us through his sacrifice right out of our world, a guarantee that, so long as we do say “Lord, Lord,” we’ll be saved – to spend an eternity in heaven. Remember

the expression that was once in vogue: “Let George do it”? This is a sort of variant: “Jesus did it.”

The other looks at Christ’s incarnation – the Word made flesh – as a way of understanding that God has truly shared our humanity – to show us how to live more complete human lives ourselves – so that “letting the same mind be in (us) that was in Christ Jesus,” we are saved from living selfish lives in which we, not God, are at the center of the universe – and so that, by toiling, even reluctantly in God’s vineyard, we can instead help bring about a world in which God’s will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven.

AMEN