



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
September 27, 2020

Gathering Around God’s Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together.

(If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At- Home Worship service, please email Brooke.office@wpceugene.org)

CALL TO WORSHIP

Praise the Lord who is our provider.

The Lord is our hope. Our trust is in God.

God brought us out of bondage and has made us free.

The Lord is our hope. Our trust is in God.

Glorious are the deeds of our God, and mighty are his acts.

The Lord is our hope. Our trust is in God.

OPENING HYMN

I Come With Joy

#515

CALL TO CONFESSION

As loving parents have compassion for their children, God has compassion for us. Confident in God’s love, let us confess our sins.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Loving God, we confess that we have failed to live in harmony with our sisters and brothers. We have been self-righteous in our attitudes, closed-minded in our beliefs, and judgmental in our opinions. We have shunned those whose ways we do not understand, and we have despised those who do not endorse our convictions. Forgive our sins of discord and conceit, and heal our divisiveness and quarreling. Help us to be charitable in our regard for others that we may dwell in peace with Christ, who is Lord of all. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Friends, the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

The Word

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit give us the words of life, that we may understand your way, and follow your truth, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 25:1-9

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

New Testament Reading: Matthew 21:23-32

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 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

“The Way of Righteousness”

Rev. David Ukropina

It’s hard to understand the lectionary passage today from Matthew 21 without considering the passages that comes before it, in the beginning of the chapter. At the start of Matthew 21, Jesus enters Jerusalem and then drives out the money changers, saying “My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.”

Our passage for today is part of a long, growing confrontation between Jesus and the temple leadership. This is not the first or the last clash between Jesus and the religious authorities, one which will ultimately lead the authorities to put Jesus on trial and which will lead to his violent death on the cross.

Still, when the chief priests ask him, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” these are legitimate questions. They saw their own authority being given to them by God during the time of Moses, and that it had been passed down through the generations, and so they believe they have the real authority.

Jesus responds to them by meeting a question with another question. He says, “I will also ask you one question. Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?” This is a classic rabbinic response. It’s like the old joke, “Why does a rabbi always answer a question with a question?” And the rabbi says, “Why shouldn’t a rabbi answer a question with a question?”

One thing Jesus is doing here is tightly connecting himself to John the Baptist. He’s basically saying that John the Baptist’s authority and his authority are essentially the same. To accept one is to accept the other. When the chief priests say they don’t know where John’s authority comes from, Jesus says “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

The chief priests and leaders were probably expecting Jesus to name some teacher or some other source of authority as the basis of his actions. Since the leaders believe they are the ones with real authority, they are ready to attack whatever he says, but they are not ready for him implying that both he and John the Baptist take their authority from heaven.

Next in the passage, Jesus moves on to tell a kind of parable where he describes two sons, one who says he will not go work in the vineyard, but then does, and another who says he will go to the vineyard, but does not. When Jesus asks who did the right thing, the leaders say, “The first”. Jesus then tells them that tax collectors and prostitutes would go into the kingdom of God ahead of them.

There’s a lot to unpack here in this parable. The part about tax collectors and prostitutes shows two groups who are at the opposite end of the social spectrum than the priests and religious leaders. Clearly, one’s social standing or even religious institutional standing is not what puts one right with God.

There’s also a question here in the parable between saying and doing. However, the contrast here is not really between faith and works, or between words and deeds. Jesus says at the end of our passage that what people needed to do was believe in John’s righteousness, and by extension, his own.

Taken as a whole, the lectionary passage today really remains a challenge upon those in authority. Its focus is on those who hypocritically do not practice God’s righteousness, and do

not respond to others who do, such as John and Jesus. The leaders do not respond to Jesus because they are not righteous themselves.

Now its easy for us today, two thousand years later, to point our finger at the chief priests and leaders, because we know the story and we know we're supposed to be for Jesus and against those he criticized. But what would happen if we were to ask questions of ourselves and our own habits of holding up the status quo and establishing authority in groups of people?

As we look at our own opinions about those in our faith communities, how often do long-time members get mad at newer members when they start taking on leadership roles? How often do older members get mad at younger members who may want to do things differently? What happens when new ideas or practices get introduced?

When Jesus asks the leaders through the parable, which son did the right thing, one son tells his father no but then does the right thing, while the other son says he will go and work, but doesn't. When the leaders answer that the one son did the right thing, it's like they are giving Jesus what they know is the right answer, but not one they really want to hear.

On some level, they must have known that Jesus was calling them to change their ways. According to the parable, those who should know better are not doing what God wants them to. It must have been so upsetting to them to have Jesus come and point out to them their own hypocrisy.

Now in applying this to church, I don't want to suggest that newer members are always right and longer-term members are always wrong, or that younger members are more right than older members. That would be absurd. What is being questioned by the parable and the passage, in applying it to church, is the idea that some people just have inherent authority based on something like age or tenure or social power.

We humans tend to do that. We tend to assign standing within any community or any group of people based on things that we value, but Jesus, as usual, tends to upset and turn over these value systems. For Jesus, the value system has much more to do with how close we are to God and God's righteousness.

So if we are not to automatically raise up things like social or political or financial power as the valued guideposts for authority, whether in church or in other parts of our lives, how do we assess and grant authority? The easy answer would be to point to Jesus and say to be like him, but what does that mean for our lives?

I think it means the kinds of things that the church has always held up and affirmed. It looks like forgiveness, grace, gratitude, joyfulness, humility, love, faith and understanding. It also means giving up things like joylessness, judgmentalism, harshness, cruelty, vindictiveness, pettiness and a lack of forgiveness.

I don't know about you, but I've been around churches and church people for a while now, both as a pastor and previously as a parishioner, and everywhere I've been, I've seen some people who seem to display the love and grace of Jesus, and others in whom I struggle to find anything that looks remotely like Jesus.

Now this may be due to my own poor perception, and we never truly understand what other people go through or experience, but I've often seen in church communities a real mix of behavior, whether in individuals or in groups, and while some of the behavior seems to match what I know of Jesus, some of it definitely does not.

One of the things Jesus is best known for is completely flipping upside down the normal hierarchies of status that we tend to put up. As a society, and sometimes as churches, we tend to value wealth, power, prestige, health, beauty, fame, celebrity, and status. Throughout the gospels, including today's passage, Jesus subverts and upends these hierarchies.

I once heard of an interview with a famous talk show host who was asked if he could interview anyone in the world, past or present, who would it be. The host replied immediately, "Jesus Christ. I would really like to interview Jesus Christ. I would like to have a conversation with him about the meaning of life."

And a minister watching the interview immediately thought, "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 and follow him."

I laughed when I read this because I knew the famous TV host lived in a ten million dollar mansion, with a stair case you could land a plane on. That's not to say that Jesus only picks on the famous and wealthy. He confronts all of us in our systems of what we tend to value, both in church and in life.

The chief priests and elders discover this when Jesus overturns the temple leaders and tells them that tax collectors and prostitutes will go into heaven before them. That's not because those lower status people had more inherent virtue than they did, but they responded to John the Baptist, and they responded to Jesus, with love and compassion, rather than angry resentment and rejection.

How does all of this speak to us today? Do we find ourselves inherently valuing celebrities, famous people in our field, those with more money, power and prestige than we do? Do we tend to value the authority of people in groups, at work, at church, in other areas of our lives, simply because they have social power or seniority?

When it comes to church, do we tend to value people more if they have lived in Eugene for a long time, or belong to a certain favored political group, or are long time members? While long time commitment to church should be valued, we also should be valuing everyone in the church equally, and valuing them according to the love they have and display, rather than any worldly authority they may have gathered up.

As we say in the youth group, everyone is a child of God, and should be treated that way. The youngest child in the church is as valued as someone who has been here for decades and served on the session multiple times. It's easy for me to say these things, and see them represented in this Bible passage, but so often churches do not end up valuing things this way.

As we ask ourselves what we should think or do in response to a passage like today's, I would say that Jesus is calling us to affirm those things that are in line with his ministry. Any time we see joy, grace, peace, love and compassion being exhibited, we should affirm this and support it. And any time we see joylessness, resentment, judgmentalism, harshness, pride and arrogance, we should reject these things, and not give them power.

It's been said before that Jesus came to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable. Any time we feel comfortable with ourselves, our status, and our prestige, we need to be called back to the way of Jesus, a way of humility, of repentance, and of living with the

values that Jesus lifts up. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH - from Philippians 2:5-11

Christ Jesus, 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess to the glory of God: Jesus Christ is Lord! Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Through God's compassion for us, God has filled us with concern for our world. Therefore, we pray for what we need.

God, you have placed a desire for truth and righteousness in the hearts of all people. Uplift those who seek to live faithfully and lovingly by the promptings of your Spirit...

God, you call disciples of Jesus to make known your righteousness. Help those who know your name to be faithful to their calling...

God you have formed your people into communities of prayer and service. Strengthen the leaders of your church. Give them humble and obedient hearts, who humbled himself in obedience to you...

God, grant wisdom to those who seek to understand you, save them from arrogance, and enable them to work for the flourishing of humankind...

God, you established the nations of the world. Kindle a love for peace among the nations and their leaders. Save them from pride of wealth or power, and enable them to serve the common good...

God, you hear the cry of all who are in distress. Comfort those who are sick in body, mind or spirit. Teach us to bear the burdens of our sisters and brothers with humility...

These prayers we offer through Christ by the power of your Holy Spirit, and we now pray as Christ taught us...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun

#265

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

-Genesis, 31:49