**Just Do It!**

October 1, 2023 Season of Creation V

Exodus 17: 1-7 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Matthew 21: 23-32

Late last week, I heard that Knox Metropolitan United Church had put up a fence around their front entrance. Apparently, they had some fires in the entranceway and this was a decision of the trustees to protect the property. I’m not sure they thought about the optics of it though. Knox Met has been known as the downtown church that has been supportive of the houseless and those who are poor. They supply office space and support for the Regina Anti Poverty Ministry in their building, as part of their ministry. They have brought drinks and food to the houseless who shelter in their main entrance alcove. So, to put up a fence sent a contradictory message to that support and welcome that had been communicated. When push came to shove, the church appears to close its doors, it’s space, to those in need. One of the houseless advocates posted on her Facebook page, with picture of the fence at Knox-Met: “If this is what your faith looks like, I want nothing to do with it.”

In our gospel reading today, Jesus challenges the religious authorities for saying they are faithful but not living it out. The chief priests and elders were upset with Jesus for clearing the temple and causing a scene which basically disrupted their power base in the temple. Jesus knew that the temple is a house of prayer, not the powerhouse of politics or economics. It is neither a source of authority, nor an authority producing center. In the temple, Jesus then cured the lame and the blind. The religious authorities then decided to try and trap Jesus with the question “by what authority do you doing these things, and who gave you that authority”. They knew that if Jesus said by his own authority, that he would lose credibility among the people. But if he said it was from God, they could charge him with blasphemy, for showing contempt for the religious authorities. Jesus saw through this trap and asked them another question which they couldn’t answer without themselves looking bad – ‘did the baptism of John come from heaven or human origin?’ He then told a parable of two sons, asked by their father to go work in the vineyard, one said yes and didn’t do it, the other said no and changed his mind and went to do what was asked of him. Jesus points out that John came and brought to the faith many who had previously rejected it or had not even been invited into it. Yet the Chief priests and elders rejected John and did not believe him, nor were they open to changing their minds. Jesus’ message is both that we are called to live out our faith, put into action what we say and believe, as well as it’s never too late to come to God, and we should never write people off.

In thinking about living out our faith, it can be easy to point fingers at others, but what about our own community? Are there areas where we might be seen as saying one thing, but not living it out? Our commitment to climate justice and slow action around decision-making regarding solar panels may be seen by some as a similar situation. We first started looking at and discussing installing solar panels in 2015. It got stalled because of finances and brought back to be proposed again in 2022. We are still discerning, at a time when the planet is in a climate crisis. Some are frustrated that we haven’t done it yet. Others are concerned about the expense. Will we live out our faith and proceed with installing solar panels?

In the gospel story, Jesus knew there was very little sense in engaging with those who are so closed minded they will not change their thinking. He knew they were not seeking information from him and that their minds were made up about Jesus long before they asked the question. There are circumstances for us today, where we need to discern whether it is worthwhile to engage in a conversation with someone who differs radically in their views from us. Is there any possibility they might change their mind? Is there an openness to have a real conversation and dialogue? If not, it may be important not to engage or if we are to engage to think of a creative question like Jesus did to challenge their thinking. What might that question be? An example in our present reality with the governments’ pronoun policy and it’s supporters might be: “Do you want children to feel unsafe at school or at home?” We also sometimes need to challenge our assumptions that someone’s mind is made up. At the counter protest of the Millions March for Children Sept 20, a person from that march came up to the counter protesters and asked about the meaning of their sign, in support of trans children and their safety. They were able to have a good conversation and the person learned things they didn’t know about or understand before. They commented that they came because they heard about the march through the anti-vaxxing network. They really didn’t understand all the issues and concerns. It can be important to be open to conversation and dialogue as we never know where they will go.

The key message in Jesus’ parable is one of grace – grace is always granted, when one changes their mind to do the right thing, to do the will of God, to turn toward love. It took an outsider like John to share the message of Good News of God’s love and grace to other outsiders, the marginalized, who hadn’t been given the time of day by the institution. Jesus continued this welcome and invites us to do the same. To actively do, to live out our faith in the community, connecting with people, loving one another. Not just going through the motions, but actually getting out into the vineyard, the community and doing the work. There is a wonderful message of hope in this parable, according to popular preacher, David Lose:

“I hear in this parable the surprising possibility of hope that someone who has refused to listen to God may yet change his/her mind. Hope that it’s never too late to respond to the grace of the Gospel. Hope that one’s past actions or current status do not determine one’s future. Hope that even those whom good folk – and, lest we forget, the chief priests and elders were good folk – in many ways the first-century equivalent of our church council members, elders, altar guild members, significant givers, and Sunday school teachers – have decided are beyond the pale of decent society are never, ever beyond the reach of God.”

This hope is not just for the outsiders, but for us as well, when we are feeling like we don’t measure up, like we haven’t done or can’t do enough, when we have strayed from the path, and are unsure of our welcome back, that God is always there welcoming us back, welcoming us to be faithful again, welcoming us to get back on track, welcoming us to receive God’s grace and be forgiven, for we are loved and blessed to be a blessing. May we offer that welcome and grace as well, in our community.

On Thursday the fence around Knox-Met was taken down. The trustees admitted they made a mistake in making the decision without a proper quorum and without properly consulting with the Board. They are still in a process of discerning how to deal with the challenges but hopefully they will consult with the communities connected to them and the houseless to come up with a more beneficial and faithful solution to address their concerns and meet the needs of their neighbours who are houseless.

Here, at the Living Spirit Centre, we are still discerning whether we can proceed with committing to installing solar panels. The Climate Justice Committee will be meeting soon to review the survey done before the summer to assess the interest and financial viability of and commitment by those who responded. We pray that we may act faithfully as we proceed with this discernment of this project.

May we be seen to be faithful in living out our faith. May we be open to accepting and welcoming with grace, those who may come to God or do God’s will who have not chosen too previously. May we know God’s grace as we turn back to God after times of turning away, or going astray. May we know God’s guidance, love and grace, as we seek to live out our faith and be seen to be faithful.