

Matthew 21: 23-32 "Hypocrisy At Its Finest" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/18/20

A drunk man who smelled like cheap whiskey sat down on the subway next to a priest. The man's tie was stained, his face plastered with red lipstick, and a half-empty bottle was sticking out of his torn coat pocket. He opened his newspaper and began reading. After a few minutes, the man turned to the priest and said, 'Say Father, what causes arthritis?' The priest replied, "My son, it is caused by loose living, mistreating your body and others with meaningless sex, too much alcohol, contempt for your fellow human beings, sleeping with prostitutes, and lack of bathing." The drunk muttered in response, "Well, I be darned; I never would have guessed that?" Then he returned to his paper. The priest, thinking about what he just said, turned to the man and apologized. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?" The drunk answered, "Oh, I don't have it, Father. I was just reading here that the Pope does." Our words matter and so do our actions, it matters how we live our lives in all the places we are privileged to live them.

Jesus told the parable from today during the last week of his life on earth in Jerusalem, with chief priests and elders all around. If there had been any sort of real trial leading up to Jesus' death, this story would have probably been used against him. The religious leaders wanted to know who had given him the authority to say and do all these things, who did he think he was? Instead of answering them, he did a typical Jesus-move and asked them a question saying "if you tell me the answer, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things? Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" This puts them in a bind, trapped between their arrogance and their fear. They know that a denial of the legitimacy of John's baptism will not play well with the crowds, whose support they need. On the other hand, if they affirm that John's baptism came from heaven, Jesus will ask them why they didn't submit themselves to it? Their answer – "we don't know" – is only 2 words long in the Greek but we can imagine it was said under their breath with deep frustration. Once again, they were out maneuvered because of their need for approval and what Shawnthea Moore calls "confirmation bias," a

term coined by cognitive neuroscientists. “Confirmation bias” is the tendency to take in only data that confirms a prior conviction and to discount information that does not conform to what we already believe. Confirmation bias is the reason Galileo was condemned by the Inquisition. It is also why politicians continue to debate global warming and pediatricians still have to explain vaccine safety to skeptical patients. When a person receives new information that contradicts a long-held belief, the individual will make every effort to reject the information by disparaging the source. For example, early in Jesus’ career, common criticism was voiced, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” and now the leaders protest, “By what authority do you do these things?” The further away the new piece of data is from one’s current point of view, the less likely one is to accept it. In addition, studies have found that if a belief is strongly held, even overwhelming evidence is unlikely to bring about a change of mind. Jesus puts it this way in our text, “Even after you saw it, you didn’t change your minds and believe John.”

Although studies show evidence alone can’t change minds, it turns out change is possible if emotions come into play. When we make a positive emotional connection with another person, we judge him or her to be a credible source of information. This might explain why tax collectors and prostitutes were willing to follow Jesus; he showed them compassion and cared about them. I have experienced it time and time again that when people hold preconceived notions of what gay people are like, what Democrats or Republicans are like, what blacks or latinos are like, words fall on deaf ears with regards to changing one’s judgment. It is only in building a relationship with the other, experiencing life in tandem with one who is different, that opinions change. For the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, it was not simply that they didn’t want to lose their power or position, it may also have been that the new information Jesus offered was simply too far away from their experiences that had, in turn, shaped their strongly held beliefs. We see this played out on the world stage over and over.

Jesus stages it for us in 4 short verses which Barbara Brown Taylor calls the story of the Yes and No brothers, or at least we will call them brothers. In the Greek, they are simply two children, old

enough to work in the family vineyard but still working out their relationship with their father. When the father asked each of them in turn to go work in the vineyard, the No brother said he wouldn't go but later changed his mind and went. The Yes brother said he would go but never did. Which brother, Jesus asks his critics, did the will of his father? It is an obvious and easy answer for any of us. The first did the will of his father, of course. It was not what either boy said that mattered but what they did. Only that was not the part that would have gotten Jesus killed. What got him convicted and killed was the second part, when he told the chief priests and elders which brother they were. They were the Yes men who said all the right things, believed all the right things, stood for all the right things, but would not do the right things God asked them to do. It was John first and then Jesus who suggested they trade in their beliefs for a fresh experience of God, but they couldn't bring themselves to do that. They reflected the old saying, "A person of words and not of deeds is like a garden full of weeds." People they despised were going into the realm of God ahead of them, Jesus told them – not instead of them, but ahead of them; people who may have said no at the beginning but who changed their minds and went, while those who refused to go continued to mistake their own beliefs for obedience to God. So many of us have this unconscious practice of substituting our beliefs about God for our obedience to God, as if it were enough to say "I will go," without ever tensing a muscle to get out of our chairs.

I wonder how it starts. Is it that we are simply creatures of habit and resistant to change? Is it like that radio announcer in LA about 30 minutes after a major earthquake who made conflicting statements: Emergency personnel and city leadership are urging people to stay off their phones unless it is absolutely necessary in order to keep airwaves open for emergency calls. And now we will be right back after this break to give away a pair of Lady Gaga concert tickets to caller number 95. Or maybe we have such active imaginations that we truly believe we have done things we really only thought of doing. Consider everyday life. Have you ever thought about calling or sending a note to a sick friend, rehearsed what you wanted to say, thought about what a nice gesture it would be, congratulated yourself on your

thoughtfulness, and let it go at that? I hope I am not the only one here who has done that? I confess I have even had a hard time later remembering whether I ever sent the card or not. I believe in the value of doing things like that. I even believe I am the kind of person who does things like that, but sometimes I do not do them. I just roll the ideas around in my brain until I have sucked all the sweetness out of them and then swallow them. It is easy to get beliefs mixed up with actions. Can you name some folks who believe they love their families but who spend very little time with them? Do you know anyone who believes in protecting the environment but drives a car that gets less than 10 mpg? I personally know of a marriage counselor who once told a couple on the verge of divorce that their problem was they were overreacting to minor problems. He said it was just like his 4<sup>th</sup> wife; she could never let things go. It is a peculiar thing, this vacuum between what we believe and what we do. It is more than just hypocrisy, it is a fracture between God and ourselves. It tears us up to say one thing and do another, it tears up our families, our friendships, and our communities, when we say love and practice indifference, say right and do wrong, or say "I will go" and go nowhere at all.

The hope I find in this text revolves around the younger generation we are blessed with in America. I am constantly surprised at the passion that is being raised among millennials who are generous with their time and money. They seek out ways to connect to those in need and have a desire to live out their values, not just write a check or sit in Sunday worship. In many ways, they are the first son; they say they will not do the "will of God," but at the end of the day, they have done the work and more. The infamous memoir by Karen Blixen whose pen name is Isak Dinesen entitled Out of Africa, speaks of such a young person named Kitau. Kitau appears at the author's door in Nairobi and asks if he might work for her. She says yes and he turns out to be a strong worker, but after just 3 months, he comes to her again and asks for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim in Mombasa. Upset at the thought of losing him, she offers to raise his pay, but he is firm about leaving. He had decided he would become either a Christian or a Muslim, he explained, and his whole purpose in

coming to live with her had been to see the ways and habits of Christians up close. Next he would go live for 3 months with Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behaved and then he would make up his mind. Aghast, Dinesen wrote, "I believe that even an Archbishop, when presented with these facts laid out before him, would have said, or at least thought, as I said, 'Good God, Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here.'" God doesn't tell us in advance, or maybe more to the point, God has been telling us along – there is no shortage of people who say, believe, or stand for all the right things. What God is short of are people who will go where God calls them and do what God gives them to do – even, say, when it is entirely new to their former beliefs. To quote Kierkegaard, Jesus wants followers, not admirers. Whether we say yes or no to Jesus is apparently less important than what we actually do. The important thing is what our lives say, and they are as easy for most people to read as the story of the Yes and No brothers. To determine which one you are, look in the mirror. What is moving? Your mouth or your feet?