

17th Sunday of Pentecost

September 27, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 21:23-32

²³When [Jesus] 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?"

²⁴Jesus 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. ²⁵Did 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?'" ²⁶But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

²⁷So 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. ²⁸"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

²⁹He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹Which 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. ³²For 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

What this parable of the *Two Sons*, that Jesus shared in our gospel lesson this morning, really comes down to is whether or not we have faith in Jesus and are willing to live in our world with his "kingdom" mentality. In the parable there are those who outright reject God, but then come to experience the amazing love and grace of Jesus and realize that working in God's vineyard isn't based on one's own good deeds or one's own sense of righteousness, but solely on the fact that God's love and grace has freed them and has assured them a place in the vineyard forever. Then, there are those who immediately say "yes" to God, but the temptations of power, status, and wealth cause them to turn away from the vineyard of grace and live in the broken world of entitlements, greed, and self-interests; a world where the powerful and the wealthy control and have authority over the systems that create boundaries and divisions that keep the "unworthy" separate. It is a world where it is believed that your worth is based on your wealth, the amount of power you have, and your popularity. It is clear that Jesus felt that the chief priests and the elders, the elites of Israel, fell into this category.



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

Of course, what Jesus is also pointing out here is the current tension we face between living in Kingdom of God here and now and living in the earthly kingdom; living as a true Christian community and living in compliance with the systems that separate and oppress people; living with the understanding that we are free to love and serve neighbor and enemy because of Christ's love and grace poured out for us on the cross, or living with the understanding that everyone must earn their right to be God's beloved, everyone must earn their way into heaven.

You see, the message that the earthly kingdom often conveys to us, a message that is often echoed by the elites of our society, is that everything we get in life must be earned through hard work, superior morals, and having an abundance of faith. Often if a person is suffering in life, under the earthly kingdom understanding, it is because they are seen as either lazy, a criminal, or someone who just doesn't have enough faith. This earthly kingdom reality doesn't take into account the other factors that make our world broken. This reality doesn't care if a person is born extremely poor and has to turn to extreme measures in order to even survive. This reality doesn't care if a person grows up in an abusive family that creates mental health issues. This reality doesn't care if a hardworking person only gets paid \$8.00 an hour and cannot afford to pay rent or buy a home. This reality doesn't care if systems of racism oppress people and keep them from having a fair chance at a decent life. This system doesn't care if people go bankrupt because they needed medical intervention in order to live. This system promotes the idea that money is more important than people. This system doesn't believe in forgiveness or grace. Unfortunately, this earthly kingdom is what is most promoted in our world.

Thankfully, the kingdom of God has penetrated the earthly kingdom, offering a different way for us to live. The powers of sin and death would love for us to continue living in the earthly kingdom reality, but thanks to the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have been freed to live in the kingdom of God, which is a reality grounded in love, grace, and forgiveness. The kingdom of God is a reality that places the person as most important, for the kingdom of God has declared that every single person is a beloved child of God and therefore sacred and precious.

The kingdom of God reality is one where the worth of any person is not based on their hard work, or their superior morals, or even the amount of faith they have; instead, their worth is solely based on the fact that they are loved by God; that we are loved by God. This is good news because, if you are like me, then you make a lot of mistakes in life. I don't always make the wisest of choices, I don't always have the best morals, and there have been plenty of times where my faith was smaller than a mustard seed.

If you need examples, even though I am a pastor, I have plenty for you. One mistake I recently made was using an expletive word to describe how I was feeling in a Facebook post back in August. After discovering that some people were offended by my use of this word, I became remorseful and sad. I came to realize that there were other non-expletive words I could have used to express my deep sorrow, and I wished I could've asked for forgiveness from those whom I offended. Since I didn't know who most of them were, I decided it was best to delete my Facebook post.



In terms of not making the best choices in life, I was diagnosed with Type II diabetes back in the spring of 2003. For 17 years I refused to take good care of myself and treat my diabetes. As a result of that bad choice, I am now living with severe kidney disease that will eventually lead to dialysis and transplant. I also now have a body that is in continuous pain and is quite weak. It has impeded my ability to do some things I used to be able to do.

Finally, if you want an example of not having a lot of faith, I can tell you that for the past several weeks I have been suffering from terrible chronic pain. This chronic pain has kept me from living a “normal” life. There are times during each day where I cannot do anything but writhe in pain. In those moments I cannot be present with my family, I cannot work, I can’t do anything except writhe in pain. I have had plenty of moments during those times where I have lost faith in God, wondering why becoming healthy again (for my diabetes has been under control since my hospital stay at the beginning of August) has caused so much debilitating pain. I often wonder where God is when the pain is at its worst.

And yet, the love and grace of Jesus is very persistent. It has always found ways in the midst of my mistakes, bad choices, and lack of faith to remind me that I am still a beloved child of God, and nothing I could ever say or do would change that. God often works through other people to remind me that I am forgiven and that I am still loved. Through the love and support of my spouse, Kristin, who chooses to be present with me in the midst of my agonizing pain; through the parishioner who offered to provide us with dinner one evening; and through the prayers my family and friends have offered, I have come to notice that God hasn’t abandoned me in the midst of my pain. This is just one example of how Jesus’ grace and love have reminded me that my baptism is still in effect and that I am still claimed as a beloved child of God. Even though I made the bad choice of not treating my diabetes for 17 years, the care that my doctors have given me, and the love and support I have received from members of this faith community has reminded me that God will forgive our bad choices so that we can turn to live a better life. I am living a healthier life because of this forgiveness.

These are but a few of the ways that Jesus has reminded me that, because I have been baptized into his death and resurrection, I have been freed to live in the kingdom of God reality as opposed to the earthly kingdom reality. God has reminded me that I am free from the fear of sin and death; that I am free to live with the understanding that eternal life has been gifted to me purely because God loves me. Because of this, I no longer have to live a life that is based on earning wealth, status, and power, but I can live a life that is grounded in the love of others; a life that proclaims that the worth of all people is found in God’s love for them.

I’m sure that if you were to look back at your own lives, you too could find times when God reminded you, through the work of others, that you remain God’s beloved child. And if not, let me be the first to tell you that God loves you for who you are. The promise of the gospel is that, no matter how the world sees you, no matter how you see yourself, the truth of who you are is found in the fact that you are God’s beloved.



Even if you have times where you forget that because of the constant message the earthly kingdom tries to convey to us, Jesus will never stop reaching out to remind you of your true identity, beloved child of God.

This reality that we are God's beloved, which was redeemed through Christ's death on the cross, the death and resurrection we became tied to through baptism, frees us to live in God's vineyard and do the work God has called us to do, which is to proclaim the gospel that all people are God's beloved and therefore sacred and holy. We are free to live as God wants the Christian community to truly live with a mindset on loving and uplifting the person. We are free to live in the reality that the kingdom of God is here and now and through us it has the power to transform the world!

God indeed uses us for the work of proclaiming the gospel, which means it is our willingness to go out and share with people that they are loved by God; it is our willingness to show this world that the lowliest of society are precious to God; it is our willingness to take care of those who are suffering, giving them the resources they need to live and thrive; it is our willingness to advocate for changes in systems and policies so that the person becomes priority, the person becomes protected, the person is given the ability to thrive, that will transform this world into realizing that we live in the kingdom of God and not the kingdom reality of the broken world.

And, again, we are free to do this work because God has promised us that, our salvation and our worth is solely based on the fact that God loves us and therefore gives us the gift of grace, and forgiveness. And if we ever forget it, Jesus won't stop pursuing us until we are reminded once again of this truth. So, knowing this graceful truth, how will you respond?

Amen.

