

## Lectionary 26 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

October 1, 2018

Matthew 21:23-32

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Today Jesus tells a parable which is deceptively simple. On the surface, this is a parable in which actions speak louder than words. There are two sons. Jesus asks which one did the will of his father. And the answer is obviously the one who *acted*. One says he will, one says he won't, but in the end, only one *did*. So actions speak louder than words. That's a good lesson to learn. And so we can all take that lesson to heart and go home. What's for lunch?

But there's more to this parable than meets the eyes. This parable is told in Jerusalem. During the last days of Jesus' life. All of the rest of the gospel readings in this church year— for all of October and November— all of the assigned gospel readings come from these last days of Jesus in Jerusalem. Lutherans like us will deviate from the assigned lessons because of Reformation Sunday and All Saints' Sunday. But the intended pattern was for us to spend two months listening to what Jesus teaches during his final days, during Holy Week. And this is the first Sunday of that.

So this is Matthew chapter twenty-one. In which Palm Sunday occurs. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem riding a donkey with people shouting about the Son of David. And Jesus turns over tables in the temple and attacks the people who work there. And then Jesus takes up residence in the adjacent town of Bethany. So what Jesus is doing is going into Jerusalem every morning, and getting into conflicts and debates and teaching and healing, and then leaving the city to sleep in Bethany.

It is an extraordinarily provocative program that Jesus is engaged in. It is literally suicidal. When Jesus first told his followers that he was going to do this, Peter said, "Oh no you won't." And Jesus, "Get behind me, Satan." This is why Peter was upset. It is a suicide mission. Jesus is going into the cave of the dragon. And poking the eye of the dragon. Repeatedly. This is only going to end one way. And he predicted it. He told his followers that this was how it was going to go down.

So that's the situation in today's gospel when, according to Matthew, *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?"* This is a "gotcha" question. They are questioning Jesus' credentials. Either he has no credentials. Or his credentials are an unauthorized blasphemy.

And so, in an ingenious pivot, Jesus answers the question with a question. He invokes John the Baptist, who by this point has become a martyr hero to the Jewish people. Jesus says: You are asking about *my* authority. What do you say about *John's* authority? And now the chief priests and elders are trapped in very same trap that they set for Jesus. If they acknowledge the validity of John the Baptist, then they indict themselves. If they deny the validity of John the Baptist, then they will have a political crisis on their hands. So they won't answer. And Jesus says, neither will he.

And then he tells this parable. And in some sense, yes, it does mean that actions speak louder than words. But it's more than that. There are two sons. One is surly. The other is a flunkey, a yes-man. So the surly son says, obnoxiously, "I will not." You have to put your two year-old voice into it. *I will not*. The flunkey sounds respectful, "I go, sir." He put the "sir" into it.

I think Jesus intends to point out two types of responses to religion. Two types of responses to God's demand. One type says "No" to God but changes its mind. The other type says "Yes, sir"—it shows outward respectability. But inwardly, there is no real obedience. So tax collectors and prostitutes are the ones who initially said "No" to God. But when they heard John the Baptist, they changed their minds. And the people that Jesus is now confronting did not change their minds. And that's the key phrase that connects the parables with the context of the parable. Change your mind. It's not so much that actions speak louder than words. It's that the surly son changed his mind.

This is a parable about being wrong and realizing it. And changing. The Judeo-Christian word for this is "repentance." And Jesus is saying that the tax collectors and prostitutes changed their minds when they heard John the Baptist. But many of the people who on the surface live upright lives do not change their minds when they really need to.

Now Jesus is saying this at the most dramatic and dangerous moment of his life. He is poking the eye of the dragon. This is a suicide mission—Jesus has already stipulated that. If I were going to let myself be killed, I think I would want it to be for a good cause. I at least want to be an organ donor so that my kidneys can give life to someone. So in this heated confrontation with the people who will eventually conspire in the death of Jesus, Jesus is telling everyone something about what he intends for his death to accomplish.

And according to today's reading, what he intends is that his death will give people a new chance. A chance to change their minds. A chance to amend their lives. A chance to turn their "No," their "I WILL NOT" into a Yes.

And that's not an abstract comment intended for tax collectors and prostitutes. And it's not an abstract comment pertaining only to priests who served in a temple that was destroyed by the Roman Empire forty year after Jesus spoke these words. It's a message for us. In our broken relationships, in our wrong choices, in our bad luck, in the places where the ground has shifted under our feet. Jesus opens a new door. We have a chance to turn our "No" into a Yes. We

have space and time to change or minds and to walk through that door. That's something important Jesus tells us in the last days before his arrest and trial and torture and death. He is opening a door for us to participate in the will of the Father. Amen.