

Lectionary A September 28, 2014, The 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, IN
Roberta Meyer

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Psalm 25:1-9
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

Who Do You Think You Are?

It is important to look at the context of our Gospel for today. This story about Jesus talking to the chief priests in the temple is a flashback that takes us back to the events that happened just a day or so after Palm Sunday. In the same chapter as the scripture I just read, Matthew describes how Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey .

Then we see Jesus going into the temple *and “he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.”*¹ He accused the people selling doves and the ones who were making change of turning the temple into “*a den of thieves.*”

While he was still in the temple some people who were blind and lame came to Jesus and “*he cured them.*” The children who were there started crying out, “*Hosanna to the Son of David!*” The chief priests and scribes heard this and got really mad. “Do you hear what these children are saying?” Jesus answered, “Out of the mouths of babes.” Now tell me, do you see how Jesus disrupted things in Jerusalem, especially in the temple?

He left for the night and return the next day. Well, the chief priests and the elders felt it necessary to disrupt Jesus while he was teaching. Our Gospel begins as the leaders of the temple confronted Jesus with this question. “Who do you think you are?” They ask. “Where do you get the authority to come in here and stir things up and heal people?”

Now let’s think about this a minute. Maybe we are too simplistic when we turn the temple priests and leaders into complete bad guys. Just how would we react if someone came into Grace and Peace and started tearing things down and claiming to know what is best for everyone here? Wouldn’t we at least ask, “Uh, excuse me, but could you show us your credentials?” “Who do you think you are?” That by itself is a legitimate question. Don’t you think?

But Jesus had some suspicions about their motives. “I will answer your question if you answer mine.” So he put a question to them? “Who do you think John the Baptist was? Where did he get his authority, from heaven or people?” They knew they were had. If they said John’s authority came from heaven, then the assumption was clear. Jesus would just ask, “So why didn’t you believe him? After all, John was the one who baptized Jesus. And if they said John

¹ NRSV

was speaking as a plain ol' person, then everyone who looked on John as a prophet would get all riled up. They were stuck between a rock and a hard place. All they could say was, "We don't know." Off the hook—and Jesus didn't answer their question either.

Instead, there came another question from Jesus. "What do you think about this story?" And really what Jesus is asking them is "Who do you think **you** are?"

He asked that question through a parable about two sons whose father had a vineyard. When you get right down to it, neither son was respectful to his father. One said, "Nope. I won't go work for you." It doesn't say the father said any more to him. But this disrespect from the first son must have been shocking to the people Jesus was talking to. Refusing to do something ask of you by your father was deeply shameful in the Jewish culture. The father would be shamed for his lack of authority and the whole family would be subject to gossip. In other words although the son eventually does the father's will it as at great cost to the father's prestige and standing in the community.

Now the other son told his father, "Sure, I'll do that for you." But he never got around to doing it. So Jesus is asking the chief priests, "who do you think you are—the first son, who said no and changed his mind, or the second one who said yes and didn't follow through?"

Who do you think you are? Do you think you are doing the Father's will? The way the story is told, the chiefs priests and the elders have to admit that the son who said "no" is the one who did the father's will: but they admitted it reluctantly because they know what Jesus is getting at.

Jesus really rubs it in and makes in very clear when he says, *"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."*²

So what about it—if Jesus came in here today and asked us, "Who do you think you are?" Which would it be? The first son who pouts and refuses when asked to do something, and then later ends up doing it? Or the second son who wants to make his father feel good by saying yes and then doesn't follow through? Well, I can tell you, I've been both. I've cried, "no way", to some things God has called me to and then I turn around and do them after unnecessary turmoil and drama.—And I have been that second guy who sounds good, but doesn't deliver what was promised.

You see, I am human. And sin comes to us humans so easily we don't even realize it. It is so destructive and the pitiful truth is that sin often just seems natural to us. There's a story I came across this week that illustrates this second son syndrome.

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A drunk man who smelled like beer sat down on a subway train next to a priest. The man's tie was stained, his face was plastered with red lipstick, and a half-empty bottle of gin 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 asked, 'Say Father, what causes arthritis?'

The priest replies, 'My Son, it's caused by loose living, being with cheap, wicked women, too much alcohol, contempt for your fellow man, sleeping around with prostitutes and lack of a bath.'

The drunk muttered in response, 'Well, I'll be!' Then he returned to his paper. The priest, thinking about what he had said, nudged the man and apologized. 'I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?'

*The drunk answered, 'I don't have it, Father. I was just reading here that the Pope does.'*³

We just can't help ourselves. Even priests who promise to love everyone equally without judging just can't follow through. We aren't capable of seeing our sin. It is just natural to us.

But there is Good News. Jesus knows our human faults. And that is why He became human. He came to show us another way. Unlike the two sons in the story, Jesus doesn't do what comes naturally to humans. Jesus does the Father's will. When those chief priests, that confronted Jesus, ended up nailing Jesus to the cross, Jesus opened the way for all of us sinners to have another chance. Like the big time sinners in the story, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, we can repent, turn around and believe. Heaven is being prepared for those who are honest about their sin, face it, and repent knowing God's love saves. You see, our righteousness has nothing to do with how "good" we are or, should I say, how good we think we are. It has everything to do with being honest and open about our sinfulness and turning to Jesus believing in God's Grace.

Paul tells us this in the Philippians text for today. Here are Paul's words from the Message Bible: *Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.*⁴

That's it. We are human but we can strive to think of ourselves the way Jesus thought of himself, humble, selfless, obedient...and when we fail? And we will fail—believe in God's

³ <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/proper21a.html>

⁴ The Message Bible

transforming Grace through Jesus Christ and repent. Let's bring our honest prayers to God today as we come to the Table, believing down deep in our hearts that God's power in us will cleanse us. That is doing the will of our Father. And then we will know without a doubt who we are.
Amen