

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Proper 21A 2008

In the Name of our One Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our continuation of the story of the Exodus, the Israelites again stop on their journey through the Sinai to the Promised Land. This time they stop at Rephidim and faced another difficulty – not enough water. Nerves were beginning to wear raw since the account says they quarreled and Moses, complaining to God, cries out; “What am I to do with this people. They are almost ready to stone me.” When I think about these people, I am inclined to cut them some slack. They had been slaves in Egypt for about 500 years. They had been separated and had forgotten their God, their history and their own identity of who they were. As slaves, they had no choices, but also no responsibilities. Things were bad, but certain and predictable. Now they are free and faced suddenly with choices and total unpredictability. Without a God to have faith in, they yearn for the certainty of enslavement.

God tells Moses to take his staff, the same staff with which he struck the Nile and denied the Egyptians drinkable water, and struck a rock – out of which poured water for the Israelites. Thus God answered their question: “Is the Lord among us or not?”

That is a question that is still with us, especially at moments when things are not going well or at least as we might expect them. I find at such moments I am pretty

much thinking entirely about myself. Faith asks us to stretch beyond ourselves and to trust that God is at work, too, in our own lives – even when we cannot see it.

In today's Gospel lesson, Matthew shows Jesus exercising total faith even in the face of death. We must remember that the events in today's lesson occur in the last week of Jesus' life. He has already predicted that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die. Jesus now enters the Temple for the second day. The chief priests and elders come up to him as he is teaching and challenge him: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" They are referring to the events of the previous day when he shut down the temple's usual business by overturning the moneychangers' tables and then proceeded to teach and to cure the blind and the lame. This was done to the amazement and acclaim of the crowds coming to the Temple for Passover. Now, the authorities challenge Jesus.

Jesus doesn't back down. Instead he answers with his own challenge. He says he will answer their question if they first answer his: "Did the Baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Remember John promised forgiveness of sin by repentance and baptism and was very popular although he challenged the Temple authorities belief that only they and the Temple sacrifices could forgive sin. Unable to answer either way, the high priests claim ignorance – and thus abdicate any authority to force Jesus to answer.

Jesus then hammers home his point by telling the first of three parables that directly attack the Temple authorities to their faces. He tells of two sons of a vineyard owner asked by the father to go work that day in the vineyard. Now remember, references to a vineyard is bible talk for the relationship between God and Israel and its people. The first refuses rudely, but later changes his mind and does what the father

wishes. The second answers affirmatively with great courtesy, but then ignores the father's wishes. When Jesus asks which of the two did the father's will, the Temple elders answer the first, the one that went into the vineyard. Jesus now returns to John the Baptist.

The Temple priests and elders were the epitome of honor. They knew the law and were judges of it. They ran the Temple where all pious Jews believed God had his earthly dwelling. They were educated and rich and kept all the laws. They felt they had no need to repent of anything. Prostitutes, tax collectors and the maimed, on the other hand, were viewed as the lowest of the low – so unworthy that they were not permitted into the Temple to make sin offerings for forgiveness. Jesus now casts the priests and elders below the tax collectors and prostitutes because even after seeing them repent and turn to God they still refused to believe.

The first son answered rudely and said he wanted to his own thing, but he changed his mind and entered the vineyard. The tax collectors and prostitutes offended people by their profession. They so offended common decency that they were denied entrance into the temple to seek forgiveness and be cleansed to rejoin the community. However, when afforded the opportunity to have forgiveness from John's baptism, they flocked to the Jordan. The second son answered with all the courtesy and skill of a diplomat, but then ignored the father to do his thing. The Temple authorities performed their duties and sacrifices to perfection. But they also went on to use the Temple treasury to make loans to the poor at usurious interest, foreclosing on their farms and selling families into servitude. When John called for repentance they didn't go because they knew the law and believed that their wealth and social position was evidence of their being in God's favor. Does this sound familiar? Well,

truth be told, you don't have to be in Washington or on Wall Street to have this kind of attitude. It exists everywhere – even in the church.

One lesson of this parable is that actions speak more loudly and truthfully than mere words. That is true in God's eyes in this parable and it is true for us in our everyday lives. But for us it is more difficult for us humans. People try to smother us or distract us with words. Told often enough, night may well be known as day. Flattery works and so does fear and prejudice. Sometimes words aren't enough to cover mendacity. That is when secrecy and misrepresentation come in. This happens at the pinnacles of power and in the preschool playground. We must be alert and wise.

Another lesson of this parable for me is that attitude trumps everything. Doing the right thing is good, but doing the right thing for the right reason is better. The tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of the authorities not only because they did the right thing, but because they changed their minds, they had a *change of heart*. That is impossible for people who are certain of their rightness. Even if they had stopped charging outrageous interest and cheating and oppressing the poor, the Temple authorities, Jesus tells us, would still rank behind the tax collectors and prostitutes in the Kingdom of God.

There are a lot of issues and questions that we are dealing with not only in our personal lives but in our church and in our economy and society. We must do the hard work to judge not only what is being said but to see what is actually being done. But that alone is not enough. We must look hard to see what a person's *attitude* is. Why do they say and do what they say and do? We don't always know what we, let alone someone else, is going to decide and do in an unknown future. Words are of some

use. Past actions and decisions are important. But attitude – our stance towards God and life - our values - that is very predictive!

In all great societies, Christian and non-Christian alike, they were known as the virtues – the building blocks of character. Things like Prudence, Fortitude, Wisdom and Temperance. Perhaps when tested by crisis we may bring the old values and the importance of character back into fashion.

Amen