

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 21: 23-32

Sermon: "Which One?"

A group of military leaders succeeded in building a super computer that was able to solve any problem large or small, strategic or tactical. These military leaders assembled in front of the new machine for a demonstration. The engineer conducting the demonstration instructed these officers to feed a difficult tactical problem into it. The military leaders proceeded to describe a hypothetical situation to the computer and then asked the pivotal question: attack or retreat? This enormous super computer hummed away for an hour and then printed out its one-word answer . . . YES.

The generals looked at each other, somewhat stupefied. Finally one of them submits a second request to the computer: YES WHAT? Instantly the computer responded: YES, SIR.

The Pharisees, like these generals, were accustomed to people saying "Yes, sir" to them. They were the religious authorities. They were used to being treated as such. But there was a new teacher in town, a teacher who was threatening their authority. The Pharisees were alarmed. They feared Jesus' popularity, his ability to heal and to perform miracles. In their eyes, Jesus was preaching heresy and leading people away from the religious traditions that defined the Jews. The Pharisees wanted to expose him as a fraud.

It was in this context that Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons. This parable follows our Gospel lesson this morning. The father went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard."

The boy immediately said, "No." Later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to his other son and said the same thing. This one answered, "O.K." but he never got out to the vineyard. Then Jesus asked a simple question: "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered.

Then Jesus delivered the punch line, ***"I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."*** (NIV)

That really was a punch line, and the Pharisees were the ones who were punched. We can imagine Jesus heard some gasps and "How dare he!" from the crowd.

It was unthinkable to compare the righteous Pharisees to blatant sinners like the tax-collectors and prostitutes. Didn't he know that the Pharisees were too good to be lumped together with the likes of them? Didn't he know that only those people with the right "credentials," so to speak, would make it into the Kingdom of God? What was Jesus talking about and why was he excoriating the best people in town?

An old Japanese legend tells of a man who died and went to heaven. Heaven was beautiful full of lush gardens and glittering mansions. But then the man came to a room lined with shelves. On the shelves were stacked piles of human ears!

A heavenly guide explained that these ears belonged to all the people on earth who listened each week to the word of God, but never acted on God's teachings.

Their worship never resulted in action. When these people died, therefore, only their ears ended up in heaven.

Jesus is dealing with a bunch of "earless" religious folk in our text. It's so easy to mistake self-righteous attitudes for true belief in Jesus as Savior. Any one of us can be guilty of it. This passage packs a powerful message.

Imagine tearing open the windows of a darkened room and letting the sun blaze through. Now imagine showing people a whole new view of God that breaks down the boundaries of everything they think to be true. Jesus is talking about what types of people are acceptable to stand before a holy God. And he passes over the religious professionals in favor of the worst of sinners. Has he lost his mind?

Or could it be that our self-righteousness doesn't earn us many points with God? Maybe we don't have to earn God's love.

Because God loves us even when we fail.

These sound like simplistic ideas, but to those who cling to self-righteousness, they are enough to shake their very soul. God's arms are open to everyone, from every race and nation and tribe and tongue, from every walk of life, from every circumstance.

We're missing something extraordinary when we put boundaries on God's grace.

In the Pharisees minds, God only had regard for that which was perfect, unblemished, without defect. They had reduced God to the level of human beings who turn their back on a little girl because of a crooked mouth. The Pharisees had no concept of God's grace God's love for all God's children, even those who were tarnished with sin.

The Pharisees were like the demanding coach badgering, pressuring, demeaning. They wanted perfection. Jesus was trying to teach them that is not the way to bring hurting people into the kingdom of God. He did it with love and acceptance. It was and is by God's grace not by works.

We are to be grace-filled. We are to value all people as worthy of acceptance, and we are to introduce them to the One who died in their behalf, and in our behalf.

Nobody is hopeless. Nobody is beyond help. Because Jesus went to the cross and grave for us all. ***"Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.'*"**

He said that the tax collectors and the prostitutes would enter the kingdom before they did. All they knew is that they were forgiven and washed clean. Of course, the Pharisees were part of it, but so were the people that the Pharisees would never accept as equals. The Pharisees wanted a kingdom that was reserved for themselves and their kind. Jesus wanted a kingdom that was big enough for everybody.

In 1962, James Meredith made civil rights history as the first Black student ever to enroll at the University of Mississippi. This simple act inspired vicious race riots in the surrounding town, but Meredith didn't let it intimidate him.

Four years later, in a bid to inspire Black citizens in the South to vote, James Meredith planned a walk from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. He carried nothing but a walking stick and a Bible.

The 220-mile walk was an effort to show that a Black man could walk freely through the South. As Meredith commented, "I was at war against fear."

On the second day of his walk, however, James Meredith was ambushed by Aubrey James Norville, a Memphis hardware clerk. Norville shot him four times and left him to die in the middle of the road. But God had other plans for Meredith and he survived the shooting.

As he recuperated in the hospital, dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of people gathered to continue his walk from Memphis to Jackson. A recovered James Meredith accompanied by 12,000 marchers entered Mississippi's state capitol.

And One man was nailed to a cross. And that started a parade. A few at first were brave enough to join it, but that few grew to hundreds, then thousands, then millions.

The kingdom of God has come that is the central message of Jesus' earthly ministry. The kingdom of God is marching forward, and nothing can stop its forward momentum, nothing can prevail against it, not even the gates of Hell. And we have a front-row invitation to be a part of it. This is the greatness of God's grace: salvation cannot be earned, it is a free gift of God, by grace through faith and not by works so that no man may boast. In Christ it is all ours. Amen