

Sermon for Proper 21, Year A: Matthew 21:23-32 – September 25, 2011  
St. Faith's Episcopal Church, Cutler Bay, Florida  
Preacher: The Rev. Jennie Lou D. Reid+

*Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling... Amen.*

Jesus has come to Jerusalem for the last time. Yesterday he entered the walled city on the back of a donkey, who was stepping on a carpet of cloaks laid down by the adoring crowd. The people shouted “Hosanna!” and greeted Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, God’s Anointed One. Jesus went directly to the Temple and violently overturned the tables of the money-changers as he lashed out at their enterprise for making a mockery of the Temple’s sacred calling to be a house of prayer. Jesus performed many amazing acts of healing that day, to the joy of the people and the anxiety of the priests. The Temple leaders see what Jesus is doing. They know he has extraordinary power. They fear his popularity and his origin. They murmur in self-righteous indignation, “Just who does this man think he is!”

Today Jesus is back – teaching in his role as a Rabbi. The chief priests and the elders are not pleased to see him. They are used to being in control, and Jesus is a loose cannon. The Temple leaders join the throng around Jesus and ask him to show them his credentials. “Who gave you the authority to do the things you do?” they cry. The people admire Jesus, as they admired John the Baptist, that unorthodox prophet who urged people to repent in order to straighten out the path

between them and God. The priests believe that calling people to righteous living is *their* job, and they themselves want to be the interpreters of the Law and the Prophets. John is out of the picture now – his headless body buried by some of Jesus’ disciples – and these priests are reluctant to take on another man the people believe to be sent by God.

Jesus understands their dilemma, and he sets out to expose them by presenting a hypothetical puzzle. “What do you think?” Jesus asks. “A man has two children; he approaches each child and says, ‘My child, go and work in the vineyard today.’” In Jewish tradition, the vineyard represents God’s Chosen People Israel, designated to be holy people for God’s glory. The Psalmist recalls concerning God, “You have brought a vine out of Egypt; you cast out the nations and planted it...it took root and filled the land.”<sup>i</sup> And the prophet Hosea refers to Israel as “a luxuriant vine.”<sup>ii</sup> In addition, the religious leaders will understand that the father in this story is God. So far, everything makes sense.

God the Father asks the children to care for God’s people so that all will flourish (or in vineyard terms, “be fruitful”). One child defiantly barks, “No,” and the other politely says, “Yes, Sir.” But this is not a story about words. Instead it is about deeds. This hypothetical puzzle is about repentance and negligence, isn’t it? Defiant One, given time to think about the situation, has a change of heart, picks

up the gardening tool kit, and takes a shift to help with the family enterprise. Polite one, after showing proper respect, walks down to the garden shop and gets involved in a discussion about the best way to care for the family vineyard. The garden experts share ideas about soil, irrigation, fertilizer, planting tables, and signs that the day for harvest has arrived. They eat a few peanuts and swap some jokes. The day slips away. Polite one never steps foot on the field, but he surely can talk the gardening talk.

The Father understands these children, how complex they are. The Good Father cherishes both of them. But his favor rests with his little helper. The Father's helper receives the blessing of the Father's approval and gratitude. Jesus says God will reward those who "walk in his ways."<sup>iii</sup>

The Pharisees and Sadducees – Israel's priesthood – are destined from birth to lead God's Chosen People in the ways of righteousness. They serve as keepers of the sacred writings and traditions, devote considerable time to interpreting and teaching the fine points of the Word of the Lord, and preside at holy festivals. They judge the acceptability of every person based on their interpretation of the Torah, the Law handed down by Moses. They are powerful men who treasure their elevated position. They like living high on the hog – literally, as they receive by law the choicest cuts of meat from the animals slaughtered for sacrifice. But

they do not live what they preach. They do not do what the Lord requires: they do not “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with...God.”<sup>iv</sup> They can say with their pious Temple voice, “Yes, Lord, I go to do thy will” – but they go off to follow their own will, following selfish ambition instead.

Meanwhile those who once turned their backs on God by pursuing a scandalous lifestyle encounter their heavenly Father’s compassionate love for them through the healing welcome of Jesus. In response, they turn their lives around (or as we say in church vocabulary, they *repent*). In the healing light of Jesus, they recognize the consequences of their unworthy pursuits: isolation, shame, emptiness, self-loathing, and fleeting pleasure. They know they are unworthy of the true encouragement, mercy and sympathy Jesus offers them. Their hearts sing. They invite their friends – other Defiant Ones – over for supper with Jesus. They walk away from their empty self-concern and head out to work the vineyard because they care about the welfare of others.

Jesus tells the religious establishment of his day that many of the very people they condemn will enter the Kingdom of Heaven before they do. Surely this idea knocks their socks off! This is a topsy-turvy vision of God’s Kingdom. Jesus’ assertion seems to betray God’s promises as these priests have come to understand them. Jerusalem’s first-century Pharisees and Sadducees are not bad

people. They are children God loves. But they are misguided, caught up in their own self-importance, trapped by fear that they will lose their status and power – and what is life without status and power? This sounds a bit like today’s Washington politicians, who stick to their sound bites and refuse to negotiate solutions to our nation’s challenges because they fear that compromise is a vice their voters will not tolerate. Getting re-elected, keeping their prestigious leadership position, is more important than serving the people for the welfare of all. Professional ministers in Christ’s Church are similarly vulnerable to the lure of the honor and power their job often provides.

Jesus’ hypothetical puzzle reminds us that God the Father is calling us to work in our family vineyard, God’s Creation. God designed this universe atom by atom and gave us the task of caring for it. God is indeed the divine Gardener, but we are the maintenance crew. God needs our hands to till the soil, our breath to speak lovingly to the plants, our voice to praise the miraculous abundance as flowers bloom and fruit weighs down the branches. We are stewards of God’s garden. Through our care it will flourish; through our negligence it may perish. Human beings respond in a variety of ways to this awesome calling. What do you think?

To be a good steward we must first trust God's good news: each one of us is loved from this point to infinity! God loves us warts and all – actually God sees us bathed in a heavenly light that erases the warts altogether! In this vein the Psalmist proclaims, “[The LORD] has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our wickedness....For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.”<sup>v</sup> Instead of wallowing in our waywardness, we can bask in the blessing of God's unmerited favor and with thanksgiving reach out to those who have not yet discovered this divine loving-kindness. This is the movement of which the prophet Ezekiel speaks when he directs us to “get a new heart and a new spirit.” We nurture this healthy heart and spirit with prayer and study as we grow in awareness of the depth of God's faithful love for us.

Next we can reflect on how we say “Yes” to God with our life. Holy Scripture tells us again and again that God has given each one of us gifts – talents that enrich our life experience both individually and as a community. As we open up ourselves in response to God's call, we find ourselves on a treasure hunt. We come to recognize our appreciation for beauty, our delight in word-play, the energizing experience of solving a puzzle, the satisfaction of coordinating an event, the wonder of listening to the reminiscences of the elderly, the miracle of a child's insight, or the thirst-quenching touch of singing soul-soothing music. As we discover the talents we have – the activities we manage with grace and confidence

and the endeavors that bring us satisfaction and delight – then we can focus outward to see where our talents can touch the world’s longing. This coming weekend Deacon Carol Carson-Hull will serve as our guide for this kind of treasure hunting. Join your St. Faith’s friends to discover your talents and to consider various ways of sharing those talents as you go to work in God’s vineyard.

Good stewardship also involves the sharing of our time to help God’s garden flourish. Making telephone calls, mailing newsletters, folding bulletins, writing notes of encouragement, and listening with the heart – all these and more help us stay connected, to discern God’s presence in our midst, and to set aside our own little worries long enough to recognize the wonder of this world. Joining others to worship or to learn is another fruitful option for sharing our time.

Finally, God calls us to share our treasure – our hard-earned cash. God does not actually need money of course, but the Church does. We have bills to pay – like salaries and utilities, repairs for buildings and grounds, office supplies and learning tools, food and drink for our Eucharistic feasts and for Parish Hall gatherings. Sharing our treasure is a way we “do justice,” providing for the poor with dignity and compassion. Freely giving to God from our treasure is also a way

we say “Thank you” for God’s abundant blessings in our lives. Our giving brings us dividends of dignity, healing and joy.

How do we dare to say “Yes” to God’s request that we go to work in the garden of Heaven’s Kingdom? Paul offers us some wise guidelines. “Do nothing from selfish ambition...Let each look...to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who...emptied himself...and humbled himself.” It takes courage to live for others – foolhardy courage. People may walk all over us. But some will see the light. Some will discover that they are lovable, even beloved, and that knowledge will empower them to live for others. Imagine what this world can become as more and more people look out intentionally for the welfare of others. It may look a lot like heaven. What do you think?

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<sup>i</sup> Psalm 80:8, 9b

<sup>ii</sup> Hosea 10:1

<sup>iii</sup> Psalm 119:3b

<sup>iv</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>v</sup> Psalm 103:10, 14