

Barre Congregational Church Outdoor Service

September 27, 2020: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ **Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost**~

“Outcasts and the Kingdom of Heaven”

Scripture Reading: Matthew 21 v 23 - 32

I. Introduction:

Those of us who grew up with siblings, can probably relate to the story Jesus is telling here in the parable of the two sons, right? You know by now I come from a big family, and I can relate to this story. Being asked to do something by a parent, or adult and refusing to do it, can have some consequences! We were not left off the hook by our parents! I am wondering what stories you have to tell about your own experiences! Let us see what Jesus is getting at here in our passage this morning, and what lessons we can learn!

II. Jesus’ Authority challenged:

In our first section of the Matthew passage, we see Jesus’ authority being challenged by the chief priests and the elders. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. These things meant His presence in their temple, and the things He was doing and saying that gave Him an authority that was threatening their own power. He was not even from their region, but came from the North down to Judea, as a Messiah, with all His followers who witnessed all the things He had been doing and teaching. You can imagine how that must have felt for them, right?

Jesus refused to answer them directly. He instead, asked them about John’s baptism, which put the chief priests and the elders in a bind. They were talking among each other about what they should say about John. In the end they told Jesus they did not know, by which Jesus responded that He would not tell them by which authority He was doing the things He did.

Why did Jesus ask them about John’s baptism? It was clear that Jesus regarded John the Baptist as an important messenger from God, with an authority on the same level as His own authority. John came with a purpose, which was to bring a message of righteousness, the will of God to the people. Also, John and Jesus were connected to each other, because of John’s earlier baptism of Jesus Christ, and of whom he said, the One who will come after me. John came for a divine

purpose, so their answer to the question of John's baptism, would have had to include the fact that they heard his message of righteousness, which would then leave them open for scrutiny about their unbelief in his message.

III. Tax Collectors and Prostitutes, and the righteous chief priests and elders:

We will now look at our second section of the passage, how Jesus really answers their question and how He brings John and his role and purpose back into the conversation. As always, Jesus illustrates His message with a story, a parable. Here He starts by asking them what they think and then He tells them about a family with a vineyard, about the two sons who were instructed by their father to go and work in the vineyard. The first son heard the request, refuses at first, but then changes his mind and goes out to do the work. The second son heard the same message, says he will go, but did not go. Jesus then asked them what they thought, who did the will of the father. They answered the first one who changed his mind and went.

Then Jesus tells them about the tax collectors and the prostitutes who will go ahead of the priests and elders into the Kingdom of God. These lowly people in Jewish society, who were despised by these same leaders, heard John's message of the will of God, and responded positively to it, because they needed it for their own lives. They believed in John the Baptist's message, and because of that, they will go ahead of these leaders into the Kingdom of God. They are like the son who turned around and said, yes father, I am sorry, I will go and work in the vineyard. But you, Jesus says, you did not believe in the message of righteousness, you were yourselves too righteous to think you needed to follow the message John brought to you; you refused to turn your lives around to face God and repent of your ways; you refused to believe in John the Baptist, and that's why you couldn't answer My question about his baptism, Jesus says. You knew what his baptism was all about, but it did not touch your hearts, and because of that, "I tell you the truth", you will suffer the humiliation of being shown the way into the Kingdom of God by the same people you despise, the tax collectors and prostitutes.

IV. Outcasts and the Kingdom of God:

Jesus' instruction about tax collectors and prostitutes is still relevant for us in the church of Christ. He speaks to us about the outcasts of society, the ones who always feel they are lesser than, who are being judged for their transgressions, who always are being looked down upon by

the ones who claim for themselves the authority to oppress and look down upon others. Jesus sees and understands this phenomenon of the outcasts and the ones in authority. He can enter the spaces of those in pain, who feel they need to hear the message of the will of God, because there is redemption and healing in that message. There is love, the love from God that soothes their pain. He is also able to enter the minds of those who think they are already in heaven, but who look down upon others, who do not believe in the kind of love that John the Baptist taught them about, the love for God and for all people. Jesus does not allow Himself to be challenged, but He uses this as a teachable moment for them to learn from, to see their ways, their treatment of the lowly, and their refusal to learn about the will of God. Of course, Jesus opened Himself up to be persecuted and to be crucified in the end. He was such a threat to the authority of His day, and that is why they challenged Him by which authority He did what He did.

V. Conclusion:

There is no other way than to ask ourselves this morning, “Who are the outcasts today in our society?” Who are these people our Lord and Saviour is holding up this morning, who, like the tax collectors and prostitutes will go ahead and pave the way into the Kingdom of God?

Then we must ask, “Who are the ones who despise these outcasts in society? Who are they?” Is it me, Lord? Is it us, Lord? If it is me, if it is us, Lord, forgive me, forgive us, and help us to turn ourselves toward You and Your love and Your will, so we can inherit the Kingdom of God with clean hearts. Also, do we know and see where such treatment of the outcasts is happening? If so, we are being called, just like John the Baptist, to speak out and remind those about God’s righteousness, about God’s commandment to love God and all our neighbors as ourselves.

May the Holy Spirit give us the courage to leave here and be instruments of God’s righteous will to speak and live in such a way, that Jesus Christ does not always have to tell another parable!

Amen