

Tending to the Kingdom's work
Menno Mennonite Church
October 1, 2023

Purpose: To explore the work of the kingdom found by the doers of the word

Message: As people of God we join in God's work tending to the ways and will of the kingdom.

Scripture: Matthew 21:23-32 (I will read); Philippians 2:1-13 (optional)

Synopsis: We prefer to be among the enthusiastic where we can. We would rather count ourselves able to capture the will and intent of God with the purity of our ability to express our beliefs about God. Weekly, daily, we are invited to speak of what we think about God. Yet here as Jesus is questioned about the authority by which his work is being accomplished, he turns the question of authority into the stick by which the kingdom is measured: is the work of the kingdom being accomplished. With this as our measure, we are invited to think more broadly of the ways of God and the ways we are invited to follow along in the name of Christ.

Matthew 21:23-32

²³ When Jesus entered the temple,
the chief priests
and the elders of the people came to him
as he was teaching, and said,

“By what authority are you doing these things,
and who gave you this authority?”

²⁴ Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question;
if you tell me the answer,
then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

²⁵ Did the baptism of John come from heaven,
or was it of human origin?”

And they argued with one another,
“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’

²⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd;
for all regard John as a prophet.”

²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.”
And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸ “What do you think?
A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘

Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’

²⁹ He answered, ‘I will not’;
but later he changed his mind and went.

³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same;
and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹

Which of the two did the will of his father?”

They said, “The first.”

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you,
the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

³² 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.

Authority can be tricky. Almost everyday I go out and ask questions of the internet with its broad and esoteric set of information. I am guessing I am far from alone. Most of the time it can be quite helpful. You get a certain error in a certain context—a problem that just pops up out of nowhere. Most of the time you can get fairly far along in figuring the solution with a little Google and a lot of scrolling. The answers are out there when you go and look. Other times I find myself down the random bunny trails that makes the online world both so much fun and so objectively time consuming for no good reason whatsoever. I now know way more about a old eastern block car that runs on a 2 stroke engine than anyone has a reasonable need to know, all because I happened on a random video that told the story of working on one in a rather amusing way. It is just a guy in a garage with a particular attachment to weird cars and a good way of presenting and presto—there goes another several hours of my life that I am not likely to get back, or ever put to practical use. There is advice on almost anything

The tricky part, we know, is figuring out how to sort all this trying to tell the good advice from the entertainment, or worst yet, the just plain bad ideas. Given that anyone with a camera and little bit of knowhow can present themselves and their ideas to the masses on a scale here-to-fore never seen it can be hard to tell the true authorities from the random whomevers who have found a way to get online, have some fun, and make a few bucks. While most of this is innocuous enough, there are some advice out there that can be really hard to discern it wisdom or not. It doesn't take a whole lot of scrolling for me to find someone who seems to me to be no more qualified than I am speaking to things that I know I am not qualified to address. We are still in the process of adapting our tools of telling useful advice from the random attempts at conversation, and we still have a ways to go. As with every communications revolution through time, things tend to get messy while we are in between where we were and where we are going, and telling authority can be confusing when all claims can be presented equally.

But this problem isn't exactly new though. It is the exact same problem that Jesus is presenting the scribes and pharisees with now. It is not an altogether inappropriate simile to liken Jesus of Nazareth, itinerate preacher and miracle worker to being a whole lot like the folks we see with good ideas online. As much as we would like to pat ourselves on the back with the basic assurance that we would not have had the same suspicion directed to the savior of the world were we confronted with the same set of circumstances as they were, I am not always sure that this is absolutely clear. The leadership directly questions Jesus' credentials and authority,

even after, at this point in the story, Jesus has been ministering and preaching for quite some time already. Notice here that they don't do one significant thing: they don't object to the content of his teaching—just primarily the person conveying the message. They do not claim that the message that Jesus offers is somehow at odds with the Law and the Prophets. He knows the sacred texts better than they do for reasons that are screamingly obvious to his followers, but is utterly lost on those who find themselves in opposition to him. This tension increases as we go along the story toward the climax of that tension, as we find ourselves here.

Jesus and his teachings threaten them precisely because they are so firmly rooted in the saving action of YHWH. The priests and elders have forgotten that the role of leaders is to facilitate the faithful functioning of community, not to divvy out power over those whom they were meant to serve. Speaking as a religious leader, dangers such as this come always as a message of caution and a prod of conviction. I must always be testing the Spirit of the living God as I seek to honor both the traditions that are ours and the possibility, always of a new thing that God might be up to lest I stand in the way. As easy as it is to condemn the existing leaders for their failing, we must see their failing as predictably, lamentably, human as humans systems seek all reasons not to reform then as something that is particularly Jewish. This passage and others like it have been used to argue that Judaism is inherently corrupt, opening many dark corridors. I must be said as many times as we can: Failing to see Jewish faith as tied to our own is a failure of our own interpretation of the Gospel and it is not faithful to the good news of Jesus Christ. The son that refuses that father cannot be thought of as a stand in for Judaism and cannot be sustained under scrutiny.

So what then are we to glean from these stories if we lay aside the implied critiques of the powers that be? Perhaps it is this. It can be a dangerous business trying to draw allegories and equivalences between the characters in Jesus' parables. Simply saying that Israel is the responsive but not acting son and there for bad is too simple. Yet if we allow the metaphor to remain just that—a metaphor symbolizing the way things are then necessarily a way of calling people out without actually using their names there is something here. When looking back on the ministry of John there are revealing elements to be explored. When someone like John the Baptist first and Jesus who followed him come and speak to the whole of society about the way things are, the appearance of things began to really matter. . The people who looked like lowlifes and spiritual losers—the folks who had, by all outward appearances, said “No” to God—they ended

up coming around to God's message after all. They admitted their sins, let John baptize them, and so did what God wanted in the end.

But there were others in Israel who had for so long been saying "Yes" to God outwardly yet ultimately didn't follow through. They looked like fine and upstanding sons of God. They dressed right. Said all the right things. Made all the right promises. But when push came to shove (as surely it did when John the Baptist confronted everyone with his fiery message of repentance), these same folks turned away from God. Their former "Yes" was undercut by their having said "No" at what turned out to be the pivotal point in God's plan of salvation.

The missing ingredient is the one that we often fail to read into the text, despite knowing full well that this is precisely what Jesus was up to. They, we, miss what Jesus was talking about altogether was not a new and better managed version of the law, a better way to be, or any advice that was fundamentally novel except for one thing: that the God of the universe with all power, mighty and fearful is also the God who insists on grace. First, last and always.

All throughout the New Testament the people of Israel are compared to a vineyard. When we here this tasking of the sons in the story, we are hearing the setting of the priority toward the work of grace among the people that God loves. When John and Jesus reached out to the marginalized and outsiders each in their turn, they were turning not particularly to those who had rejected the notion of communion with the divine, but realistically with the people who were so fully and finally broken that they were never reached out to in the first place. They invited the people who had never been asked to come inside and work within the vineyard to which they too belong. Jesus was always being accused of hanging around with the wrong crowd and doing the wrong thing. The simple fact that this was so was counted as still more proof as to why Jesus could not possibly be who they expected him to be. By ignoring and isolating those to whom the Kingdom was also coming, were not those who would be most naturally caretakers of the kingdom saying the right yes, but executing the effective no?

Vineyard work, kingdom work, is compassionate work and grace work. As such it is seldom precise, often messy and frequently uncomfortable. When we limit the rightness of the kingdom and our little part of it to only those who look like us, smell like us and think like us, then we are separating ourselves from the work of tending the world which Jesus bade us to love. This work is supposed to be first and foremost about others, starting with those you fell most tempted to overlook if not condemn. The church suffers when it makes it purpose about the

sustenance about those on the inside and forgets that the body was meant ultimately to reach out in all things. Jesus found so many people who were hungry for the message of salvation by grace is because no one else had been proclaiming that message. The Pharisees actually *avoided* these people. God, they thought, likes only certain types of folks, and so if a given person did not appear to be in that likeable category to begin with, then the duty of the devout was to steer well clear of such a greasy character. But John declared that God wanted exactly those fringe folks. We all get into the kingdom the same way: by the grace of God.

When we say yes to God the father, Jesus claims, we are saying yes to the way of the kingdom; we are saying yes to the least, the last, the lost and lonely that God holds so dear in all ways. When our yes becomes only a self improvement project and does not reach another, then we are indeed missing the point, much like the son who turned and walked the other way. The question is as it always is with us: what is our yes now, and how might we reach into the yes to reflect the fullness of God?

We are invited to declare the good news of God to all who we met, especially to those who don't seem to fit. This is good news; it is hard news. May we each provide our yes and embrace all we are called to be in the name of Christ. Amen.