

Beware, Ye Good People of St. Luke's

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St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

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Matthew 21:28-32

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 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. 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.

If you have ever spent much time on a computer you know what I mean when I speak of “click bait.” These are the enticing and often scandalous little headlines and pictures that appear on the screen which invite you to click your computer mouse for access to enter an advertisement or article. One type of click bait is geared to those who worry about their health, and it invites the viewer to click this article to learn what new symptoms are being found to indicate a serious illness. One will commonly see click bait which will tell us what a certain kind of toenail fungus probably indicates. (Click to the article and find that it is a plain indicator of brain lesions!) Another click bait invites us to find out which blood type is least susceptible to COVID. One can receive quite a medical education on the internet!

Today's Gospel lesson presents a lesser known parable of Jesus which presents a crucial indicator of whether one will or will not enter the Kingdom of God. The theme of the story is typical of many of Jesus' teachings—the Kingdom being open to the lowly and wayward, but closed to the religious leaders and mighty of that day. Having heard similar teachings from Jesus in other stories, we too easily tune out this parable and miss out on the important Kingdom indicator, and we do so at our own peril. Let us click our attention to Matthew 21 and pay careful attention.

This is not one of Jesus' more exciting parables, at least at first glance, but like all of Jesus' teachings there is much more than meets the eye! It begins simply enough. *“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went.*

The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, "The first." This story isn't as tense and action packed as last week's parable about labor disputes and fair wages. I say that one can easily overlook the story, for this is what I have done. In all my years of preaching I am not sure that I have ever weighed in on this teaching of our Lord, and I now wish I had done so long ago. He addresses this story to the religious leaders who had confronted him, not long after he had entered Jerusalem on Holy Week, but the crowds of common people were also gathered around to hear it.

The meaning of the story was plain, and for those who did not understand, Jesus would soon offer an explanation. The first son heard the father's call to work, but refused. Later he changed his mind and went out to work. This son represented the sinners and outcasts of Jesus' day who early in their lives turned away from God, but later changed their minds and sought to do God's will. The second brother agreed verbally to work, but did not keep his word and stayed home. This brother represented the religious leaders who appeared to be following God, but when the true call to respond and to do the Kingdom's work came, they refused. Jesus the Messiah finally came, but they, like the unresponsive brother did not follow. Jesus summarizes it in his terse remark: *"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."* Here and at numerous other times in the Gospels we see the great reversal predicted. The religious would miss out on the Kingdom while the apparently ungodly would find their place in God's plan. The Jews who long sought the Messiah and the Kingdom would miss it while the Gentiles who did not seek it would find it. As we have heard this message before it is easy to pass over this teaching and to miss its real insight, for it goes on to explain the most basic difference between those who found the Kingdom and those who did not.

Why the difference in responses? In our mind's eye we are good at making the religious leaders into ugly, selfish and pompous ogres. Some of these folks may have fit this description, but such images miss the real point. We also look at the poor and often sinful people who did follow Jesus and imagine them to be kind and pure hearted souls who have been merely misunderstood most of their lives. This too misses the point. Some have stressed the jealousy of the leaders toward Jesus, and while there is much truth to this theory, it still misses the truly central point. There was a single indicator of who would and who would not follow Jesus and it explained the radical difference of results for the religious leaders and the common people and sinners.

The difference was John. *"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."* John the Baptist was the difference. It is easy to read the Gospels and pass over John as a mere warm-up act. We are anxious to get on with learning about Jesus, and in our anticipation, John is easily forgotten. But John played a crucial role and he made an essential difference!

His message was deceptively simple: "*Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.*" To repent means to turn, away from self and evil, and toward God. This command is given with some urgency as God is near. John's baptism was the sign people were asked to receive to show their desire to be cleansed from their sin and to be ready to meet God. This message was an echo of the many prophets of Israel, and Jesus would begin his ministry with the same message. John's ministry attracted huge mobs of Jews eager to confess their sinful ways and to receive the baptism of cleansing. The religious leaders, on the other hand, were not so enthused about John's sermon. They stood at a distance and merely observed.

Why did the religious reject John's call? The answer was simple. They did not believe that they needed to repent. They were children of Abraham. They were studying and obeying the law with great care. They were good people, or so they thought. They were convinced that they were better than the rabble which flocked to John. It is easy to mock these religious leaders and see them as stuffed shirts, but let us be cautious in our judgments. Suppose for a moment that there was a tent or open field meeting across town where a newly famous preacher would be calling loudly and dramatically for us all to repent before our righteous God? What would we do? Would we go and confess our sins, or would we feel it unnecessary? Or might we laugh and mock those who went to these services and wept for their sins? Might we look down upon all this as a poor man's religion? We are not so far from the religious leaders of Jesus' day than we care to think.

Why did the notorious and outcasts embrace John's message? At first glance it appears that John was preaching against them and trying to humiliate sinners. But a second look offers a much clearer picture. John was calling these folks out for their sins, but not to humiliate them or degrade them. John was offering hope. Your sins can be washed away. Let us be ready for the Messiah who will then lead us on to a whole new way of life! These sinners knew they were guilty and needed little convincing of that. They delighted that beyond their confession was abundant hope. Would we have been so quick to confess and then embrace that hope? John quickly passed from the scene as Jesus began his ministry, and before long John would be martyred. He had passed away, but his message and the prerequisite role that he played lived on.

Where do we fit in this picture? We are certainly not the racketeer tax collectors nor the prostitutes of the world. Most of us grew up in the Church and stayed out of trouble throughout our lives. We generally think of ourselves as good people. Aren't we? If we were to have been alive in that day, we probably would have felt ourselves much more aligned with the religious leaders than with the rabble which Jesus was praising. Jesus paints a very disturbing picture, not to upset us, but to open our eyes and give us fair warning.

The scribes and Pharisees were “good people,” at least as we commonly think of good people. They were convinced that they were following the rules, and seemed to know the rule book very well. They were very religious people, although they refused to stoop to undignified poor man’s religion. They were convinced that they were good people, but they would miss the Kingdom by a wide margin. In fact, they would be instrumental in the greatest crime which this world has ever seen—the crucifixion of God’s Son. They were the initially obedient son of Jesus’ story that promised to do the right thing, and probably intended to do the right thing, but they lost their way. They saw the Messiah face to face, but in the end acted instead to save the Temple and their religious system from possible disruption.

There is a real danger in being “good people.” As time goes by, we can begin to think that we are incapable of ever doing anything really bad. I recall years ago when some recent high school grads got themselves into big trouble and it caused quite a stir in the community. They were honor students, each bound for big name colleges, but a prank and a dare got out of control. They were caught on a burglary done simply to see if they could get away with it. It seems unimaginable that such good kids would do such a thing, and yet this can too easily happen to good kids. They forget their power to do stupid and even wicked things. It is sobering to remember that Germany was a center of Christian faith, having brought us Luther and the Reformation, and was also an intellectual center with the greatest universities and minds. It was this same Germany which brought us Hitler and the Third Reich. But “good nations” full of “good people” can easily find excuses and reasons to slip away into great evil. And again, let me remind us all that the leaders of Jesus’ day were “good people” only trying to save their religion and way of life from a dangerous radical.

We are not quite the good people that we like to think that we are. Our Reformed tradition of Christian faith has always stressed the full depth of the fall of our human race. People often think that Calvin and the Reformed theologians were a gloomy lot, but they spoke a stern word for our good. The Heidelberg explains our situation well in the fourth and fifth articles:

Q. 4: What does God's law require of us?

A: Christ teaches us this in summary in Matthew 22—You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first and great commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

Q. 5: Can you live up to all this perfectly?

A: No. I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor.

That is a harsh word, and by this is not meant that we are incapable of doing anything good. What it says is that our selfishness runs very deep. In the comfort of our modern world is it easy to think ourselves as more moral and in control than may be true. I was once told that if one were to go a day without food they would beg. Two days they would borrow. Three days they would steal, and let us not think what one might do after that.

The bottom line on all of this is that we do well to recognize ourselves for the frail and fallen people that we are. I think of the world of accounting. In any business's financial records there are numerous ways that an accountant's work is checked and double checked for its honesty. Why all these checks? These are in place to keep honest people honest, as it is frighteningly easy for good people to go off the path of full honesty, to a slight and "harmless" alteration of the books, to outright embezzlement. We are not as strong as we think we are. God know this, and God loves us, and God wants us to do what we can to keep ourselves honest. Follow good bookkeeping procedure, and listen to John!

God does not want us to be too convinced of just how good we are, nor does God desire that we wallow in our sin and sadness. When I think of a healthy understanding of ourselves, I often think of the recovering alcoholic in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. (Yes, I am quite fond of that organization.) The recovering alcoholic knows their own weakness and they know what it means to be saved from the dark grip of addiction. They frequently confess their weakness, and in that they find great strength! They know the dignity of a sober life and delight in the gift that this is from God. There is no room in such a life for groveling and self-hating. They merely see themselves for who they truly are. They see the value of John's baptism

Just days ago, our Jewish friends celebrated Yom Kippur—a season of humble reflection and repentance before God. Earlier in our year we honored Lent, the forty-day season of repentance. We do not do these as an exercise in sadness, but as a wise examination of our true selves. We do this so that we can walk closer to God and steer clear of the temptations and sins which come easier than we like to think. Beware, ye good people of St. Luke's, for we are seldom so far from God as when we have convinced ourselves that we are good people.