

Matthew 21.23-32

A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

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Yes, Really

The scene in the Gospel this Lord's Day is a Monday Morning, as Jesus is confronted about what he said the day before. 24 hours after the sermon as it were. Some religious folks – Pharisees, chief priests and scribes - approached him with particularly pointed concerns.

They were the ones who, on that day before – which was Palm Sunday – they were the ones who tried to pull him aside telling Jesus to keep his followers quiet, as they were boisterous with their shouts of adoration and hosanna, upon Jesus' entrance into the city of Jerusalem. Jesus was causing a stir. He had met with outcasts; he has healed people on the Sabbath; he chased the money changers out of the Temple.

And now Jesus has returned to that same Temple to teach. And this is when they cornered him. The main thing they wanted to know was who had given him the authority to do these things. Just who did he think he was?

Instead of answering them, he did something that was typical for Jesus. He asked them a question. "What do you think?" He told them a story, a parable . . . Jesus was not one to give people answers which they could come up with on their own, but to have them arrive at the truth themselves . . .

He told the story of two brothers, whose father asked them to work in the vineyard. One said no, but later changed his mind and went. The other said yes he would go, but never did.

Which son did the will of his father? "Easy," they answered, "the first one." But what got Jesus in trouble, was when he told the chief priests and scribes that they were the second son . . . and that the "tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

They were the "yes men" . . . who said all the right things, believed all the right things, stood for all the right things, but would not do the right things.

They *thought* they were doing the right things, mind you. But they were so attached to their own ideas about what those things were that it was hard for them to accept much – or any -- correction.

He reminded them about John the Baptist who, much like Jesus, called them from their set ways, to the experience of God. But they could not do that. Their words said yes to God, but their actions to Jesus were No . . .

And then, people they despised were going into the kingdom ahead of them – not instead of – but ahead of them. Those were people who said "No" at the beginning, but who had a change of heart and said "yes" . . . while those who refused to go continued to mistake their own convictions for obedience and faithfulness.

It is a story about hypocrisy – pervasive and classic as that is. It is consistently the charge leveled against religious people – who profess something and do something else.

Parenthetically, that's the one concern about the church today that is raised in critique from those who are staying away from churches – those who are in their 20's and 30's – who are looking for authenticity and integrity and community.

As Shakespeare put it: "God has given you one face, and you make yourself another."

Such is the sense of those who corner Jesus. Sure, they are the ones who say one thing and do another . . . like professing and promising love on Sunday, and then finding a mess of ways to slander and slight, or just plain ignore each other on Monday. It is a serious charge against those who proclaim or pretend goodness and "Godliness" . . . especially if their piety is used to seize advantage or privilege over others.

Maybe it's the political campaign currently upon us . . . what with campaign promises presenting one position and then maintaining another, while not really admitting to changing in the first place . . . that leave us skeptical of those who seem so particular about their positions. They can be reasoned and rational so adeptly with each utterance, sounding good. But do we really know where they are, and their position . . . [on the financial bail-out, on the war, on campaign financing, on the environment, on taxes] . . .

In *Alice in Wonderland* Alice is advised by [I believe] the Mad Hatter, almost as if she were on the campaign trail herself, the Hatter tells her:

"Be what you would seem to be - or, if you'd like it put more simply - never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise." ¹

Hmmm. OK . . . This past week, is that why Jim Lehrer and Katie Couric were so frustrated? The Mad Hatters may be loose in the world of politics . . .

It's easy to be critical. Certainly that's true with regard to the Pharisees, who had their own stake in the political realm . . . They kind of set themselves up for criticism, trading in criticism as they did.

But what of us and our ways? . . . The beliefs we hold and embrace, but don't do anything, or much, about. Maybe, even, we imagine that we have done the good thing, but we really only thought about doing it.

Consider everyday life. Have you ever thought about visiting a sick or estranged friend, even rehearsed what you wanted to say, and decided on a card instead? . . . Thought about what a nice gesture that would be, congratulated yourself on your thoughtfulness, and let it go at that?

As for me, yes. I am very concerned about doing such things . . . but sometimes I have missed.

The ideas are there, and they are good, but my "yes" has slipped . . . into a "not quite yet" or even a no.

Beliefs can languish, staying and standing rhetorical, actionless.

¹ Lewis Carroll. *Alice in Wonderland*

I think of the love we have for family, and the expressions we lift up – as we know many who do -- but spend very little time with their families. I think of many who believe in protecting the environment, but consumption and consumer patterns tell another story. There are those who believe deeply in democracy, but don't vote. Even those committed to faith and to church, but do so without coming so much or pledging support. Even today in baptism, the commitment we make as a church family to the care and nurture of little ones – is it manifest in assumption or action, really?

There is an array of such things – in that vacuum between what we believe and what we actually do. The gap or vacuum has its consequences.

Our professions of love, of faith and belief, fall short; or, our commitment to them certainly does . . . The theological word for it is sin – missing the mark. That's both inevitable and forgivable, but never really tolerable for those who love God.

That vacuum and gap – the distance by which we miss the mark – is painful to bear. It's hurtful. It can tear us up: to say one thing and do another.

It's tears at the fabric . . . of families, relationships, communities . . . when we say "love" and do indifference, or say right and do wrong, or say "sure I will go" and go nowhere at all. What we believe has no meaning apart from what we do about it.

Here at the Larchmont Avenue Church, in statements of mission, we have proclaimed -- We are a community of Christ of all ages: welcoming and gathering in love, growing and learning by grace, going forth to serve.

Like that one, we have lifted up great statements of our identity and belief in the creeds of our church across the millennium, in words of the confessions – even those here in today's worship.

We have incorporated all those proclamations even in the search materials that brought us a wonderful new pastor in the past month . . . But there is not a creed or a mission statement that exceeds the worth of one visit or act of care for one in need, or food for those in hunger, or cup of water for those who thirst, or help and hope for the hurting, or actions . . . of compassion.

There is no shortage of words . . . and no shortage of people who say, or believe or stand, for all the right things. There have always been plenty of those in the world.

But what God is short of are people who will go where God calls them and do what God calls them to do – even when it is against their beliefs. The theologian Soren Kierkegaard put it: "Jesus wants followers, not admirers." Whether we say yes or no is less important than what we actually do. Really.

May we act on our faith, and be faithful in our actions. In Christ,
Amen.