

Exodus 17:1-7 “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Philippians 2:1-13 “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete... for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure”

Matthew 21:23-32 “What do you think?... Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

Directly into the Heart of God

O God of mercy, may we have the wisdom, the strength, and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth – come when it may and cost what it will.

Between last week’s Gospel portion and this week’s Gospel portion, a lot has happened in the Gospel according to Matthew. Last week Jesus and his companions had left the Galilee and were drawing large crowds in the region of Judea beyond the Jordan River. After a whole lot of teaching about sincere discipleship and how to get along in community, Jesus headed for Jerusalem, continuing to teach and to heal, moved with compassion, as he went.

Between last week and this week, in Matthew’s story, Jesus has also continued to deal with constant infighting among his closest confidants and allies, even after all his teaching about how to live in community. He has healed not one but two blind men outside of Jericho. Then, nearing Jerusalem, he has requested a donkey *and* a colt for a wild ride up the steep path into the city. The crowds have waved branches and spread their cloaks on the way and shouted “God save us” – Hosanna – and Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, appealing for help from the highest heaven. And he has probably looked skyward for help a few times himself.

The whole city was in turmoil, Matthew says, and Jesus entered the temple, angrily overturning tables of the people operating the currency exchange and the chairs of the people selling doves (the poor people’s sacrifice), accusing them of robbery. He healed people at the temple who were blind and who were lame. He accused the temple authorities of taking advantage of the most vulnerable people for their own gain, and then he headed out of the city to spend the night in Bethany (which means, House of the Poor). In the morning, Jesus returned to Jerusalem. He was hungry, Matthew tells us. Seeing a fig tree with no fruit, he cursed the tree and it immediately withered and died. He headed back into the temple. And that is where we rejoin the story.

I’m aware that I’m indulging in what a former parishioner of mine once called my soap opera method of preaching. Sorry if it’s tedious – but context is important here (and besides, it’s a great story)! If Jesus strikes you as sounding impossibly difficult, if you find yourself thinking, “I don’t like THIS Jesus,” consider his condition. According to Matthew, he was hungry and angry and probably lonely and tired as well. He was mad mad.

It doesn’t surprise me that there are complicated textual problems with this passage. This intense encounter must have been confusing because of how emotionally charged things were in the few days before Jesus’ arrest and execution. The teaching we heard about the father and his two sons seems to have gotten so garbled in the earliest transcripts of the Bible, that scholars cannot agree on what Jesus was trying to illustrate in his parable of the two sons who each said one thing and did the opposite. And I can (and do) spend hours completely fascinated by the scholarly arguments about translation and rhetoric. But at this point anyway, I am unable to

figure out what difference the arguments make here. I'm struck by the ways that we can get so caught up arguing about what things mean, pondering what parts of this story were added in later as an editorial comment, and did the editors get it right or wrong, that we don't do the work that we are being called to do.

You know, there's a famous rabbinical story about someone who asked a rabbi, "Why do rabbis always answer a question with a question? The rabbi pondered a moment and said, "so what's wrong with a question?" There are three lines of questioning in this story (explicit and implicit) which matter most to me – which are most compelling to me. I hear these questions addressed to us, questions which might make a huge difference in how we live our lives. And in the end, that's what matters most to Matthew. For Matthew, the Gospel is all about ethical imperatives. Being a Jesus-follower is not just a claim to be made, a statement of belief. Being a Jesus-follower is a life to be lived out, it's work to be done.

The first line of questioning that this text addresses to us is about authority. By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority? You. You body of Christ, where do you get off? Who told you that you could be here? Who told you that you could heal? Who told you that you could teach others? Who told you that you could challenge unethical behavior? Who told you that you could change the world?

The second line of questioning that this text addresses to us is about the summons to enter kingdom of heaven – the realm of God. It's an ongoing and present reality – not a by and by in the sky kind of heaven. How do you respond to the call to come into the realm of God? How are you responding? What change of heart is being demanded of you right now – today -- because the realm of God has come near and you are being invited in? That's what John the Baptist was teaching so powerfully that the crowds believed: that a change of heart and a change of ways was urgently needed because the realm of God is so close.

And the third line of questioning that this text addresses to us is who is going into the kingdom of heaven – the realm of God -- ahead of you? (not instead of you, but ahead of you)? And when you see them going in ahead of you are you feeling scandalized and disgusted or glad and hopeful (or a little of all of those)? We are of course, both the body of Christ and the ones who are being called to repent. We are the ones who are say "no" and then do the right thing, and the ones who say "yes" and then neglect to do the work that we have been called to do. (Well, I am anyway). We are the ones who can be impossibly hungry, angry, lonely and tired. We are the ones who get annoyed by people who speak prophetically and heal without the appropriate permission. We are the ones who are outraged when our money tables get overturned. And we are the ones who can be compassionate beyond belief. We are the ones who work for justice and pray for peace, with and without permits. And I dare say, we are the sinners who are going ahead -- directly into the heart of God. We are.

Thanks be to God for paving the way and opening the gates very wide.