

“The Value of One's Word”

Matthew 21:23-32

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²³When he 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?” ²⁴Jesus 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. ²⁵Did 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?’ ²⁶But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” ²⁷So 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.’ ²⁹He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went.

³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹Which 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. ³²For 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.

Prayer.

I've never been to Missouri
but at times it feels like I was born
in the center of
the “Show Me State.”

I have committed enough
false promises myself
and have been the recipient of enough
false promises by others

throughout my life
that I've grown weary, skeptical, and dismissive
of those who make claims
of living within
the enfolding arms
of God's grace.

"You've felt the movement of the Spirit?"

"You have experienced a call to ministry?"

"You've had a religious experience and you want to know where to start?"

"You saw Jesus standing right in front of you
and you two decided to have a little chat, did you?"

All-righty-then.

My old and crusty character
rolls the eyes and gives a stupefied frown.

"Call one-eight hundred I AM A N-U-T" I think to myself.

But I really can't say that.

I am a preacher, after all.

And this is what I am expected to believe.

Resentment is sure to gurgle.

Forty-four years since I was baptized

Thirty-nine years since I answered an altar call

Twenty years since I was ordained

and I've never seen a literal Jesus

or heard him speak out loud.

I sit there annoyed.

"Don't get overly emotional," I've been known to counsel.

"Keep things in perspective."

"Let's see how it works out in the long term."

“The proof will be in the pudding.”
You must have baggage, I think to myself.
“Come back in a few months,
or maybe next year,
and we will talk then.
We'll see if it really was a miracle.”
Come back when you are not quite so
wet behind the ears.
Don't let the screen door hit you on the fanny on your way out.
Have a nice life.

“Awake!” Jesus cries!
And ice water is thrown into my face.
“tax collectors and the prostitutes
are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you”
and I discover that I am standing in the company of
lawyers,
the scribes,
the chief priests,
the authorities;
all those who resent the fact
that Jesus reaches out to sinners
that God's grace isn't an award to be won
or a prize to possess.

Tax collectors and prostitutes-
before bishops and preachers
before lay leaders and Sunday school teachers?
Where is the justice in that?
Move to the back of the line
and make way for those
who have persecuted Christians, and enjoyed it

who have sold their body without shame
and cause us to recoil with disgust.

God's grace is extravagant
to those who need it.

There are a lot more people
in need right now
more than you and me
crusted-over half-baked Christians
now at the end of the line.

"We may be cooked and stewed
but we are genuine!" We protest.
Just where did we pick up that nasty habit
of believing Jesus came to placate the healthy?

Jesus came to cure the sick
to welcome home those
who do
the will of the Father
who is in heaven (Matthew 7:21).
Jesus came to triage the wounded
that's why they are sent
to the front of the line.

Oh, yes.

We will all get to heaven, all right.

We will all be seen.

But those more critical than us
are moved to the head of the line.

Isn't that the way it should be?

So we don't get the corner office
or a window with a view.

When we live in the will of the Father
God's grace is sufficient.
Or it should be.
“Blah, blah, blah”
you and I may boast
of achievement or accomplishments
we've made for the kingdom.
“What's in a word?” Jesus responds.
Anyone can make a word.
Words are nothing more
than words-
grains of sand on the world's beach,
a speck of dust
blowing in the wind.

The value of a word
is found in the action that supports it.
Crack the crust
and join me in getting over ourselves.
It isn't about what we say
it's all about giving value to words
by what we do.

Works are the fruit
born of a faithful heart.
Works are the ministry
soldiering on
quietly in the background,
building the kingdom,
while others do the talking, meeting, and planning.

God's grace is extravagant

for those in need;
Sufficient for the rest of us.

Am I so shallow
that I resent what God has done for you?

“Get over it!”

Jesus commands us whiners and complainers.

Am I so crusty
that I have forgotten
how truly amazing God's grace really is?
Give us another wake up call, oh Lord.
Give us another splash in the face.

Get over the rote reply
of doing the will of the Father
by doctrine, committee or report.
Roll up your sleeves
and I'll roll up mine.
Lend some meaning to your words.
And I will rededicate myself
to practice
what I preach.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.