

Sermon for September 27, 2020 (Year A)
 Sermon Texts: Exodus 17: 1-7 and Matthew 21: 23-32
 Sermon Title: “*Who Made You the Boss of Me?*”

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Holy Mystery, your power is a fearful thing, whether you bring forth water gushing from a rock on your mountain when Moses struck the rock with his staff, or whether your power is displayed by manna and quail appearing for a disgruntled people in the wilderness. Yet, we often fail to see your presence in the world and to hear your word spoken to us by prophets. We ask that when you present your truth before us, in scripture and parable, we will hear it. As Jesus did, may we be willing to be the servant for all. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy Fire and burn in us; come as Holy Wind, and cleanse us from within; come as Holy Light, and lead us in the darkness; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.

Once upon a time there was a hospital that decided that it was losing too much money and not making that much of a difference in the lives of its patients. In addition, the patients were often cranky and difficult as we can sometimes be when we’re not feeling well. In order to address the problem, the hospital’s board of directors decided to stop admitting patients who were ill. Instead, it would only treat well people so that the hospital could be fairly certain that patients would benefit from a visit to their facility. The hospital wanted poster patients who would go away stronger and healthier than when they arrived. Of course, this is absurd. Hospitals exist because they are there to offer the best care for very ill people. Hospital staff train many years to make sure that, if at all possible, the patient can return as quickly as possible to family, friends, and activity. So much more demanding a task in these challenging times.

Take the hospital as a parable of the church. Church attendance is frequently cited as the most single indicator of spiritual vitality. So if you are in the pew, or the pulpit, in the choir, even in these days of Zoom, U-tube, and video streaming, one might conclude that if there are many members, especially families with young children, that the church is a spiritually vital group. We are the church’s poster children. But it is for poster children like us that Jesus reserves some of his harshest words: “*Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.*” Isn’t this message reminiscent of last week’s Matthew passage and of our Flannery O’Connor short story?

It is the last week of Jesus’ life. He has ridden a donkey to Jerusalem, driven money-changers out of the temple, and cursed a fig tree for not bearing fruit. Now he has gone back into the temple to teach. Critics of Jesus, the Bible scholars, and the frequent church attendees corner him. They question him “*By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?*” In other words, “*who made you the boss of me?*”

In the debate that follows, we see Jesus and the religious authorities playing a game of cat and mouse that centers on John the Baptist and the origin of John's baptism. The exchange looks as if it's a draw, until Jesus tells the parable of the two sons and concludes with a second reference to John the Baptist. Jesus describes John as coming "*in the way of righteousness.*"

Righteousness both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament means being in right relationship with God. Jesus is saying that John was in right relationship with God. The prophets of old came from God to confront the authorities of their times, and John the Baptist and Jesus have come to confront the authorities of their time. The prostitutes and the tax collectors believed John and repented. The religious authorities didn't change because they didn't think anything was wrong with them. They didn't think they were sick, but the church, as St. Augustine so wisely commented, in a hospital for sinners.

Jesus confronts the chief priests and the elders in the parable of the two sons. The first son initially tells his father that he isn't going to work in the vineyard, but eventually he changes his mind and shows up. The second son gives lip service to his father's request but never shows up. According to Jesus, what you believe is not what you say you believe; what you *really* believe is what you do. This is a parable about showing up.

The gap between talking the talk and walking the talk is called sin. If we talk about doing good, but never do it, we end up spiritually empty. If we say we are disciples but never work in the vineyard, we live without joy. Jesus would like nothing better than for the religious authorities to have the joy of living their faith. The religious authorities thought that they had said "yes" to God, but they had gotten so attached to their own ideas and laws and rituals that it was hard for them to have a fresh experience of God in Jesus Christ. This is a warning to all of us who are the poster children of the church.

When I taught creative writing I would often give the students the assignment of writing their own obituaries. Young people don't take kindly to this exercise, because when you're young it's easy to believe in your immortality. It's a good spiritual exercise to contemplate your own death, whatever your age. Mortality is a gift from God that helps us consider how often decisions are made in faithfulness, but not in certitude. How often our deepest held beliefs have led us to live lives where we see the glass as half empty or half full. How often we have relied upon God's grace for hope, rather than our own efforts and resources.

A man once bought himself a cemetery plot and a lawn chair; he took some time to sit in his lawn chair on his cemetery plot. He wanted to see his life from the point of his death, and he wanted to see his death from the point of view of his life. What the man did was similar to a spiritual discipline practiced by Ignatian spiritual directors who ask Christians to imagine thinking backward from their dying moment to a decision or choice that they made. Was that decision or choice from God?

There is a cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts, where I have visited the graves of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his friend Henry David Thoreau. Emerson was probably the best

known and most widely read philosopher of the 19th century, and his immense white quartz marker with bronze plaque reflects the ego of the man. We can see the same thing in the obituaries in any newspaper where the accomplishments of the deceased go on for columns and columns. A few yards from Emerson's marker is Thoreau's headstone the size of a large brick that has the inscription "*Henry.*" It has the humility of earth with the breath of God removed. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*"

The in-laws of a member from my lectionary group once visited the Baptist church in Plains, Georgia, where former president Jimmy Carter taught a Sunday School class. They were fortunate enough to get tickets to attend the class, but what they were most impressed with was that at the bottom of the church bulletin it said that in the coming week Rosalind Carter would be cleaning the church and Jimmy would be cutting the grass. Their humility is the humility of Thoreau. And they are emulating Christ. It the image of Christ given to us in Philippians, the one who showed up and "*emptied himself taking the form of a slave,*" who was "*obedient to the point of death.*" It's not what we say, but how we live, serve, pray, and grieve as people of hope and faith. We all get to acknowledge in our actions and in our attitudes "*who is the boss of me.*" Amen.