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Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
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Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus 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?" Jesus 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. Did 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?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So 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.

"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."

We gather together this morning as a community of unique individuals. We have come from a variety of places. We are of varying ages, temperament, outlook, gifts and so on. We have had lots of different experiences this past week.

Some of us have been working hard, too hard perhaps. Some have been looking for work, which is desperately difficult to come by these days. We have had great joy in our lives, some of us, perhaps a child has been born or we've celebrated an anniversary. There has been profound sadness, as we faced illnesses or the death of a loved one. You name it, it probably has happened to at least one of us this week when you take the whole congregation into account.

Given all this diversity, the uniqueness of every person here, what is the common ground? What is it that draws us all together? More to the point, Who is it that draws us all together? And the answer to that, of course, is we are here because, in some way shape or form a person has drawn us here, and that person is Jesus. We don't even have to think of this in some mysterious or mystical way. It is this simple. If Jesus had not have lived, there would be no church. And if the church didn't exist, Grace and Holy Trinity Church (GHTC) wouldn't exist and we wouldn't be here. That is amazing to think about.

What I want to do today is this: Through our gospel, spend some time with this Jesus who lived so long ago, but who has such power to create this moment, to bring together this community. Who is he? And how are we to respond to him?

The question of Jesus' identity is a central question of the gospel reading for today. The chief priests and the elders ask Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?" These are questions of identity. They are a way of asking, "Who and whose are you?" Jesus has been doing "these things" the text says. Most immediately in Matthew's telling of the story this refers to the royal entry into Jerusalem which was followed by the cleansing of the temple. That is the context of our gospel this morning. These actions are messianic actions. They show Jesus claiming that identity.

The elders and the chief priests are not genuinely interested in the answer, they are just trying to trap Jesus. If Jesus said outright, "I am the messiah" then Jesus could be immediately arrested and put to death as a rival to Roman authority. And Jesus will be killed soon enough, but not yet.

Jesus puts a question back to the chief priest and the elders. He is not simply evading an answer, buying time, he is confronting them...giving them a choice. So he asks them about John.

"If they are able to acknowledge that John's call to baptismal repentance was truly authorized by God, they will have no difficulty in recognizing the source of his (Jesus') authority. If, on the other hand, they admit that they cannot see the hand of God in John's ministry, they will demonstrate their incapacity to accept the answer that (Jesus) would give them."¹ What they end up doing is nothing. "We don't know" they say. And Jesus leaves them there. "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." I am not going to tell you who I am.

Jesus then goes on to tell to make one further point by telling the parable about the two sons. Point being: Even if someone can answer Jesus' question, that is not the end of the matter.

Neither one of these sons in the parable was all that great toward the father who asks them to work. One is surly and answers, "No I won't go" but then changes his mind and goes. One is courteous, but has no follow through. Through this parable Jesus pointedly tells the religious leaders, those who lives look right, that they have missed the boat. And the people whose lives look all wrong, prostitutes and tax collectors, believed John and are in the right. And why? Because they repented, they changed. At the end of the day, it is not what is said that matters most, but what is done.

I think we can put ourselves right into this story by identifying with the chief priests and the elders at least to some extent. They ask good questions if for the wrong reasons. We can ask the right questions for the right reasons. We can ask "Who are you Jesus?" And when Jesus asks us a question back, essentially saying, "You tell me. Who do you think I am?" we should answer.

The response that the chief priests and elders give is "We don't know." And that can be a legitimate religious response. It is certainly a response that Episcopalians love. We like to keep our options open.

¹ Interpretation "Matthew" by Douglas Hare, page 245

“Believers...have no vocation or commission to know all the answers...Even Paul, though he was not hesitant to declare his own convictions, emphasized that...he didn’t know...(everything) This is not a feigned modesty, but a confession of the fragmentary nature of human knowledge as such... (so) ‘We do not know’ can be a very Christian confession of faith. But not here.” Not in the context of today’s gospel dynamic.

When Jesus says, “I will ask you a question” and in so many words asks us “Who do you say that I am” we must answer. And if we are open in worship, in private prayer, and drink deeply of the Scripture, we cannot help but hear Jesus asking us this question. The fragmentary nature of human knowledge “should not veil a refusal to decide...Honest searching and struggle for the truth must finally decide, take a stand,...” .² If we refuse to decide, then Jesus will just leave us alone. And then we wonder, “Where is he?” What we really need to ask is, “where are we?”

That is part of the reason we are here today, is so that through our worship we can answer the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Well, ...Jesus is our Lord, the anointed, the messiah, the Son of the living God. Worship gives us the opportunity to make that confession, to decide, even as we continue to work out what all that means.

We must put the answer to work even as we are working on the answer. One way we do that is by keeping the Sabbath day...you are here.

Another vital, essential way we put the answer to work is with our stewardship, our gifts of time and talent and yes, treasure.

I’ve had a lot of experience in 27 going on 28 years of ordained ministry of preaching on financial stewardship. When I say the word, “stewardship”, knowing smiles come across faces...and I can almost see the cartoon bubbles pop up with people’s thoughts, “Here it comes. He just wants my money. I don’t want to think about money, that makes me anxious. I’m going to think about something else here...let’s see, we need milk, eggs....”

But please, hang in here with me for a few moments if you will. So, yes. GHTC thrives when you give your gifts of time and talent and... treasure. And yes, the budget of this church must grow if we are to respond vigorously to God’s call. This year, the Vestry adopted a deficit budget and we’ve been working hard to “mind the gap.” If we don’t close the deficit in 2012 and grow some besides, we will have tough choices to make.

In response, this year the Annual Giving Team led by Catesby Beck is asking that every, single member of this church pledge. Right now, around 60% pledge. The Annual Giving Team asks that everyone pledge, they are asking for 100% response. I know that many who don’t pledge make offerings and I thank you so much. And I also ask, please consider formalizing that with a pledge. That way, the church can plan more effectively.

But pledging is ultimately not about budgets. Pledging and giving are an encounter with Jesus, a spiritual discipline. It is a matter of saying, in a pledge, “Yes Lord, I will do this.” And it is a matter of following

² The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol VIII, page 410.

through, “Yes Lord, I do make this offering.” In pledging and giving we take the best qualities of each of the sons in Jesus’ parable. We say, “Jesus is Lord, the messiah” with our lips and with our lives.

And with faithful stewardship, truly we receive much more than we give. As I give and as you give, we personally reap the benefits of generosity and faith. We grow closer to God. It is that simple. And that is the bottom line.

You are a community of unique people, from all over, facing all sorts of challenges and joys. I stand in awe of what you do each day, the courage you show. You are a blessing . I am glad Jesus brought you here. I am glad, together, we can say, “Jesus is Lord.” And I live in hope for what Jesus has in store for each one of us and for this congregation. Amen.