

Talk is Cheap

Matthew 21:23-32

When 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?” 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.”

Today's Gospel contains a couple of delightful rounds of verbal sparring. The religious leaders are at it again, trying to trap Jesus into some ill-considered declaration that will discredit him. In this case, Jesus was teaching in the temple, space that the Jewish leaders considered their proprietary territory. "By what authority are you doing these things," they asked, "and who gave you this authority?"

Jesus, however, didn't take the bait. He decided to answer their question with one of his own: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" You can almost hear the harrumphing and the beard-tugging as the religious leaders calculated their response. "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 responded as any evasive, befuddled sophomore would answer: Gee, we don't know.

It reminds me a bit of the old Abbott and Costello routine, where the teacher asks Costello the answer to a question. "I don't know," he replied, whereupon the teacher persisted: "What do you think?" Costello, massaging his chin thoughtfully, says, "I'm not sure; what do you think?"

"I don't think," the teacher replies imperiously. "I know!"

"I don't think I know, either," Costello says.

If the first round of verbal sparring between Jesus and the religious leaders ends in a draw, the second round provides the knockout punch. Here, Jesus presents something of a puzzle, a puzzle that will be all too familiar to parents of adolescent children. Suppose you ask one child to empty the dishwasher, Jesus says. The son defiantly refuses to do so, but later, after the parents go to bed, he empties the

dishwasher and maybe, for good measure, takes the garbage out without being asked. (Hey, we can dream here; it's just a hypothetical situation!)

And then, Jesus continues, you have a daughter who readily agrees to mow the lawn, but she never gets around to it. Who is the better child?

Matthew doesn't say so, but I suspect more beard-tugging and harrumphing from the old men who viewed themselves as the guardians of the law. But this time, after their caucus, they got it right – and they fell directly into Jesus' rhetorical trap. Yes, better to refuse the gospel and then embrace it than to provide lip service to righteousness and then fail to live up to your affirmations. Actions, in other words, speak louder than words.

I wonder if the religious leaders who challenged Jesus that day in the temple ever got it. Did they realize that they'd fallen into the trap that Jesus laid for them? They were the ones who were making all of those heroic affirmations of faith and adherence to the law, but they came up a bit short on the follow-through. Elsewhere, Jesus refers to them as a "whited Sepulcher," their deeds so at odds with their pronouncements as to render their supposed piety no better than a tomb.

But I wonder if Jesus' words don't strike us as well. We affirm our faith, but we don't always live fully into our status as God's people. We descend too frequently into bickering and pettiness. Or, like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, we cling to our legalistic affirmations and allow adherence to the letter of the law supersede the mandate of love.

Talk is cheap, Jesus is saying in today's Gospel. The tax collectors and the prostitutes are better than those who make grand professions of

faith but then fail to live up to those standards. If we mean to follow Jesus, it's not enough simply to mouth pious affirmations, as did the religious leaders in first-century Palestine. Jesus calls us to follow through – and to follow him.

And where will that lead us? Following Jesus will make us uncomfortable at times, force us to reconsider our priorities and our prejudices, invite us, perhaps, to move beyond our circle of friends and embrace an outsider or two.

The adventure of faith entails more than mere affirmation; the religious leaders of Jesus' day were good at that. But Jesus calls us to live out our affirmation, to make good on our pledge, to join him on the journey, a journey that might very well shake us out of our complacency and reorganize our priorities. When love transcends the law, everything is up for grabs.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day wanted no part of such an adventure. They preferred the comfort and certainty of their tidy affirmations and their strict legalities, even as they failed to live up to the standards they affirmed. The way of the gospel, however, points us in another direction – toward uncertainty, at times, and maybe toward a reconsidering of everything we thought we knew as we live into the faith.

It's a perilous pathway for those who crave certainty and regularized rules, clear demarcations of good and evil, friends and enemies. But it's an adventure I, for one, wouldn't trade for the world.

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