

Sermon on Matthew 21:23-32 → September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011  
*Responding to Christ*

God's grace and peace to all of you from our heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus. Amen.

There's an old Japanese folk tale that I once read about that goes something like this. There was a man who had recently died and gone to heaven. While in heaven he saw some wonderful things – lush gardens with trees and flowers always in blossom and beautiful mansions that littered the landscape. Upon seeing one of these mansions, the man entered one to see what was inside. Inside the mansion the man stumbled upon a room full of shelves. And to his amazement, on these shelves weren't things that you might think would be on them. On the shelves were rows and rows of ears...not ears of corn mind you, but ears of people; ears of people who listened to God's Word but didn't respond.

In today's Gospel reading we get a sense of what that little tale hinted at – people hearing all about Jesus Christ, but not responding to his call to follow him – or as Jesus says in another place, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Mt. 16:24-25)

The first part of our text tells us about Jesus' encounter with the “powers that be” – the chief priests and the elders. He encounters these people while entering a temple, and if you read a few verses earlier, you'll see how upset these leaders are. Just before this, Jesus had cleansed the temple, throwing tables over, money and animals flying all over the place. But this isn't what they were really mad at him for. What they were really mad at him for was that he healed blind

people, he healed lame people – people who couldn't walk or were disabled. And not only did he do that, but also he started teaching in the temple.

So these priests and elders ask him two simple questions: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority.” Now, Jesus could have simply answered this question by saying, “I'm doing this because this is my Father's will, I'm doing what you are supposed to be doing. And who gave me this authority? My Father did, I don't need your permission. He gave you this authority too, but you'd rather not do it.” But he didn't do that. Instead Jesus poses a question right back at them. And who wouldn't get frustrated with that? So Jesus asks them about John the baptizer – Was his baptism from heaven or was it from human origin? Was the baptism he called people to be washed in have its source in God or was it because John just thought it was a good idea? Now, if they answered this question one way, they knew Jesus would say, “Well then, why didn't you believe him.” And if they answer the question another way, they knew a lot of people would be against them. Of course, they take the easy way out and say, “We don't know.”

But Jesus even presses them further; he puts their back against the wall with a parable. In this parable we see there are two sons – one says he won't do what his father wants, but he ends up doing it, and another who says he will do what his father wants, but doesn't do it. And so Jesus asks, “Which one did the will of his father?” And anyone can figure out this answer – it was the one who actually responded and did the will of the father even though they didn't say they were going to right away. It was the one who turned out to be disobedient in the beginning, but ended up being obedient in the end.

Last week we heard about how Jesus promises that the first will be last and the last will be first. Law for the “first ones” for sure, and Gospel for the “last ones.” And we see that vividly here. The “first ones,” the ones with all the power and authority end up being the last ones because they didn’t properly respond to Jesus Christ – they simply listened to him (ears in heaven). And the “last ones” in this story we see are the crooked tax collectors and prostitutes – people who were disobedient to God with money and with their bodies, but ended up not only listening to Jesus but also responded and changed their lives around to follow Christ.

Like I said at the beginning, this story is all about responding to Jesus Christ. And this is one thread that weaves its way throughout Matthew’s gospel – the call to listen to him, the call to change your mind, repent, the call to serve. Responding to Jesus: It’s not just about saying, “yes I believe this and this and that about God and his Son Jesus.” And this is one of the dangers I see with confirmation – that we teach our students all about what God has done for them in Jesus Christ, we teach them the Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s prayer, the Sacraments – we teach them everything they need to know about God and what God has done and continues to do for them, and for some, that knowledge doesn’t sink into their hearts, it doesn’t sink into their hands and feet as they love their neighbor as themselves. But not only that, this is one of the dangers we all have when we come to church to hear God’s Word. We hear it and say, “Well, isn’t that a good story?” And off we go doing the same things that can ruin or weaken our relationship with God and with other people.

Responding to Jesus Christ is all encompassing. The crooked tax collectors and prostitutes knew this. It involves much more than our ears – though our ears play a crucial part. As the Apostle

Paul reminds us in Romans 10:17, “faith comes through what is heard and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” Yes, responding to Jesus Christ involves what we believe, in Whom we believe, but it also includes a life of daily repentance, and a life of service. Responding to Christ involves our brains, our ears, our hearts, our hands, our feet, our bodies, and how we use the things God has given us. Responding to Christ is all encompassing, it’s all or nothing.

Now let me say something else. In this passage from Scripture we hear about how two groups of people respond – the first ones and the last ones, the ones with power and the ones without power, the ones who have the most to lose and don’t follow Jesus and the ones who do follow Jesus because they have the most to gain. But what about us who might be in the middle? What about us who think we are not as well off as the chief priests and elders, but who are also not as corrupt as the tax collectors and prostitutes? How do we respond if we find ourselves in the middle? This middle group, the group that you, me, and most churches in America probably represent, and for that matter most people in our nation represent, is one of the hardest groups of people to figure out (thanks for calling me here by the way!). Maybe the best way to describe those churches, perhaps even our own church and those who worship here(?), would be from Revelation 3 which says, “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth...”

Since Jesus got to ask a question to the priests and elders, I’m going to go ahead give you a question for you to think about this week (and no, you can’t ask me question in return!). Where do you see yourself in this week’s story, in the parable Jesus told, and how will you respond? Are you like one of the chief priests or elders who think they can question Jesus? Are you like

the one son in the parable that didn't listen to the father right away, but eventually came around to do the father's will? Or are you like the other son in the parable, who tells the father what he wants to hear right away, but ends up doing nothing in the end? And before you choose, just know that whoever you connect with, we all need the forgiveness Christ won for us on the cross. Amen.