

*Seeds of Change*  
October 1, 2017  
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

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.*

I began the study of the gospel passage earlier this week at the Marin Civic Center as I awaited my fate on Jury Duty. A city employee asked us to please be quiet so others could read or work as we waited for our jury assignment. In a room of 300 people also awaiting their fates, I happened to be sitting in front of the only two women laughing, talking incessantly as they played a word game together on their phones.

I wanted to turn and say, "We were told to go outside in the hall if we wanted to talk. Please follow the rules." With further thought, I changed my mind. As I read the passage, I realized, like the religious leaders challenging Jesus from where his authority comes, because they think they're the authority- I would be like those who want to be the judge of others and fail to look at themselves. I am certainly not always a rule follower! Who knows what's going on in their lives and maybe this camaraderie, which was hardly offensive, was offering them respite? I decided it was best to let the Marin Civic Center employee be the authority, not me.

Today, October 1<sup>st</sup>, is World Communion Day, where we celebrate our oneness in Christ with all our brothers and sisters around the world. When we share Holy Communion today, we are meant to remember our interconnectedness around the

globe and rejoice in our unity. This particular Sunday actually began twenty-two hours ago at the International Dateline in the western Pacific, with people celebrating World Communion Sunday in palm-thatched chapels in Fiji.

As the day moves westward around the globe, others have gathered in Japan, the Philippines, Russia, in Africa, Europe and now the Americas to invoke the presence of Christ in sacrament and receive healing power in their hearts and lives – Christians of every race and color, of all languages, dress and custom, in every conceivable circumstance of life.

Author Mark Noll notes that Christianity appears more and more as a cross-cultural faith. It appeared first in Asia, then Africa and Europe. Once it was rooted in a new place, the faith itself took on newness from the culture – challenging, reforming and humanizing cultural values. All across the globe, Christianity is a rich spiritual resource with infinite flexibility calling people to infinite love.

Today, we also receive the annual Peace and Global Witness offering as a way of sharing what we have with others around the world in need. This special annual offering supports efforts of peacemaking to situations of violence, conflict and war. Twenty-five percent of the funds will be retained to support local efforts, and I thank our Mission Outreach Committee for discerning and distributing these funds. Today is also the month that marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation.

These events – World Communion Day, the Peace and Global Witness Offering, and Reformation Sunday month – all give deeper meaning to our gospel passage today. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and is teaching in the temple. The religious leaders ask him what gives him the authority to do this. Ah, he says, I'll tell you if you can answer this: What gave John the authority to baptize? They don't answer, because if they say "God," Jesus will ask them why, then, they didn't listen to John; and if they say a human figure, the crowds will go nuts because they regard John as a prophet. So Jesus, in his subversive way, tells them, neither, then, will he answer them.

Jesus then tells the religious leaders a story. A father commands the first of his two sons to go and work in the vineyard, and the son says, "No way. Not going," but later changes his mind and goes. The father says the same to the second son, "Go and work in the vineyard," and the son says, "Sure, dad. Of course I will," but doesn't actually go. Jesus asks, "Which son did the father's will?" and they answer, "The first son."

Jesus tells them that the prostitutes and tax collectors, those lowest on the social ladder, will enter the kingdom of God first because they, like the first son, recognize their sinfulness and repent. They respond to John and Jesus and want to do God's will, so they change their minds and their ways. The religious leaders don't seem to have this capacity. They are inflexible and focused on judgment of others and rules, of keeping the status quo, rather than embodying God's true nature of love and humility. There are thus those who appear unworthy to enter the kingdom of God,

but change their minds and repent, and there are those who *appear* righteous and worthy, who are actually missing out on the blessings of the kingdom and are far from it.

True virtue is in doing rather than confessing. Actions speak louder than words. The first son says he won't but does, the second son says he will but doesn't. We don't know why the first son changes his mind, what brings that about, but it may have something to do with the types of anthropology in the book of Matthew.

Scholar and local theologian Herman Waetjen is offering an online class of Matthew to alumni of SFTS and I am honored to be a part of it. The presentation this week was on the distinctions between psyche and soma, or soul and body in the book of Matthew. Waetjen asserts that to connect with the soul is to connect with God is to connect with the other, with freedom of infinite possibilities.

Detaching from the soul and staying in the realm of soma, body, is to remain singular, isolated, fear-based and finite. This is perhaps what is going on in our passage today. The religious leaders, while claiming in theory to be valuing the relationship with God, are operating from the soma realm, staying in their heads, and not relating on a soul level, which requires vulnerability, trust and surrender.

The first son who refused to help his father at first and then changed his mind, likely evolved from responding strictly from the body, where he was concerned with his own needs and desires, to responding from the soul, where he considered the other, took himself out of his own selfishness, and reversed his initial decision. He turned from his disobedient ways and did the will of his father. There is a saying: We are not responsible for our first thought, but we are responsible for our second thought.

We can invariable all relate somewhat to both sons. What blocks us from allowing ourselves to be changed, to change our minds, to open ourselves to new possibilities, to connect with our souls, with God? A recent book entitled, *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World* presents the integration of the values of science with religious faith as a way to expand our horizons of what is possible. Author Michael Dowd shows that religious inspiration can be gained from contemplating evolution, and that evolution is actually of a sacred, holy, and divine force.

Dowd explains how human consciousness emerged within a world of powerful and mysterious forces beyond our control. Modes of communication evolved from gestures and oral speech to writing and mathematics, to print, to science and to computers; and so, too, has the evolution of our understanding of the scale and respectability of Creation. He notes that an inspiring consequence of seeing the full sweep of history through scientific evolution is discovering that human circles of care and compassion have expanded over time. This is good news.

Very early on, our abilities to cooperate with one another were limited and localized. Anyone outside the tribe was suspect, and considered an enemy. Communication circles expanded from villages, chiefdoms, and early nations to today's global markets and international organizations as knowledge was accumulated, retained and shared. The emergence of the internet, the World Wide Web, has made collaborations possible that are no longer constrained by geographic distances and political boundaries.

Throughout this evolution of human communities, an inner transformation has also been taking place. At each stage, our circles of care, compassion, and commitment have grown and our lists of enemies have diminished. Our next step, Dowd says, is learning to organize and govern ourselves globally, enjoying a mutually enhancing relationship with the larger body of Life of which we are a part.

Dowd shows this evolution of communication and resulting circles of compassion with a series of concentric circles, beginning in the middle with Family Clan, and incrementally spreading outward with Tribe, Village, Kingdom, Nations, Global Markets, United Nations, and now, moving towards Global Governance/Symbiotic Humanity.

For religious traditions to fulfill their potentials in our postmodern world, Dowd says, each will be called to harmonize its core doctrines with the evolutionary worldview. Religious leaders within each tradition are discovering that the evolutionary outlook bolsters their core teachings. Instead of a threat to our faith, evolution is a very precious blessing. It doesn't diminish religion; it expands its meaning and value globally.

Jesus doesn't force his hearers into making decisions; he plants the seeds -- the seeds that inspire us to examine our hearts, connect with our souls, and align them with God's will. Jesus plants the seeds, and we are free to either neglect or nurture them. We can, like the second son, walk away, saying we're going to but not actually following through; or we can, like the first son, tend to the vineyard, examining our part in God's kingdom and participating in it. We do this by connecting with our souls through relationship with God and other. Through prayer, song, Scripture, baptism and communion.

I was glad that I changed my mind about confronting the women talking behind me at Jury Duty. It took a little extra focus to make progress in my work, but I began to enjoy listening to their word game. At one point, one of the women suggested a word that didn't work in their game -- she had spelled "ennui" incorrectly. So I turned and whispered, "2 n's!" and they laughed.

"Are we bothering you?" one said, touching me gently on the shoulder. I paused. "No," I said, sincerely, and smiled. "Well, just let us know if we are." They giggled with warm and generous sweetness. I concluded that they didn't have to be demonized for talking, for breaking the rules, that it was more of a peacemaking

effort to join in our common humanity, our common struggle to make sitting and waiting in Jury Court to be as enjoyable as possible.

I was originally going to exert my self-righteousness and changed my mind; the laughing women behind me changed theirs, offering to be quiet. All because of this passage, where Jesus planted the seeds of change, the option to choose God's will, not mine. We are always free to choose. Perhaps the second son eventually joined his brother in the vineyard, and they found joy in their collaboration of working for their father.

God is here, inviting each of us into the kingdom of peacemaking and reconciliation, the vineyard of infinite possibility and transformation. The seeds have been planted. Will we go and tend the vineyard?