

“Unsavoury Characters”
October 1, 2017
Text: Matthew 21:23-32

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

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.

Everybody wants to get to heaven. It's true. We may not say it, but we all want to be in that same residence in the afterlife. And so we go through life doing things we believe will get us into heaven. We are like the people of the Old Testament. We believe that if we do things one way we will go to heaven, if we do things another way we will not. It's a simple cause and effect formula, and it does well to keep us on the right path.

But along comes Jesus, who preaches a message like none we've heard before. And it begins with the announcement to *repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near*. While all this time heaven has been this place we want to get to, now we hear Jesus teaching that heaven wants to get into us. It's a different kind of message that turns everything upside down.

Unsavoury Characters

But one thing is sure. There is good and there is evil. So, beware of the troublemakers. Do not associate with the lowest of the low. There are some who are far from God and you better think twice before you go near them. There are some people in the times of Jesus who would not even be permitted in the temple. Gentiles, sinners, anyone found to be ceremoniously unclean. Do not go near these unsavoury characters, lest you also become unclean.

You see, that one over there, he's a tax collector; a traitor to his own people who has sold out to greed. and do you see this one over here? have nothing to do with her. She sells her body in the night. You are not going to see tax collectors and prostitutes in the temple.

The Parable of the Two Sons

But in today's story you do see Jesus in the temple. And he is teaching and causing, as always, friction in the house of God.

"By what authority are you doing these things," they ask him, *"and who gave you this authority?"*

The chief priests and the elders are out to get him. They challenge him, and he won't play their game. He turns the question back on them and reveals they did not believe the words of John the Baptist.

But Jesus goes one step further and pulls a short parable out of thin air about two sons whose father asks them to go out and work in the vineyard. By their response, Jesus shows that will of a human being is found in the heart. One says he will not go, but changes his mind and goes out. The other says he will go out, but then he does not.

What does it mean to go out and work in the vineyard? In context, this a sign of obedience. One son is obedient, one is not; and you would not know the difference by their words. Only through their action can you see their obedience or disobedience. Their actions speak louder than their words.

The Message of John

It's all tied in to the message of John the Baptist. John preached repentance. Some believed John, some did not. Some did not believe him at first, but then changed their mind; others minds remained unchanged. Some get it. Some do not. We may be surprised at who actually "gets it."

An eye-opening, revolutionary thing is happening in the Gospels. Unsavoury characters are making their way through the doorway to heaven on a regular basis. And it's because they believe what they have seen and heard and they obey the will of God. They comprehend the message of John, and as he and Jesus after him preach the

message to repent, they do that very thing. They turn from the ways that were leading to destruction and death, and they move in the opposite direction, now facing God, the move forward into the kingdom of heaven.

Tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, outlaws, the uneducated, and the unemployed. The messy, the loud, and the inappropriately dressed. The ones with the strange hair, the threatening attitude, and unacceptable behavior. The ones who in our own mind we might disqualify from the kingdom of heaven, and certainly from the community of faith.

But when God calls a person into faith, and they are drawn by the Holy Spirit to turn their lives around—to repent—and they do—who am I to say no to that process?

Jesus has one thing to say to the self-righteous who would bar entry to those responding to God's grace:

"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

The Good News

Jesus did not come for the ones who are well, for the people who have it all together. What can Jesus do with the respectable crowd? The proper people, the high society well connected types, who are convinced, for heaven's sake they are always doing the right thing?

The good news is that Jesus came to heal the sick, the lame, the blind, the dying and the dead; the unpopular ones, the troubled people, the ones without a home, and without any hope. These are the unsavory ones. And it's us. You know as well as I that we are the unsavory ones.

The Location of Heaven and the Invitation to the Table

The message of Jesus and John before him repositions heaven and redefines our residence in it, underlined by the call to repentance.

If the tax collectors and prostitutes are indeed going into heaven before the chief priests and prostitutes, it is because they have repented; they have turned back to God; they have followed Jesus. It is because they have believed what they have seen and heard, and now they have turned.

Repent for the kingdom of God has come near. The Table of the Lord is now open to all.