

Sermon – September 27, 2020

Text: Matthew 21:23-32

Theme: Get to work in the kingdom of God!

You would think that after all these years of ordained ministry (just over 37 years), I would have learned to **not** complain about the gospel texts that are assigned for the various Sundays of the church, the gospel texts which are the basis of a sermon I need to preach. But unfortunately, I still haven't learned how to do that so here I am once again with gospel text where my first reaction is – Really?! What is the good news (after all that is the what the word gospel means) is this gospel? What is even the point of this gospel?

I mean come on – did you listen to the gospel reading? It seems to be a question of authority. Who is really in charge of how things are supposed to happen? The chief priests and elders who are understood as the religious authorities or Jesus who has what credentials? Rather than defending his credentials, Jesus launches into his own questions about authority, putting the chief priests and elders in a no-win situation – no matter how they answer they will end up offending people. How does that help clarify anything? But to make it even more unclear, Jesus then launches into a parable about two sons, one who says yes but doesn't do any work in the vineyard, one who says no but then gets to work in the vineyard. How does that answer the question of authority? Then to make it even better Jesus throws in the whole thing about prostitutes and tax collectors going into the kingdom of God ahead of those religious authorities; twice talking about prostitutes and tax collectors just in case he didn't offend people enough the first time he said it! And again the point of all of this is???

So again, where is the good news especially in light of everything we are dealing with in these days – an ongoing relentless pandemic, hurricanes and fires, social unrest as we tackle very unsuccessfully the complicated reality of racism, AND one of the most contentious political election season which continues to reveal how deeply we are divided in this country. We could really use some good news in these days. Well, as I wrestled with text and held it up to the realities of our society and daily lives, I realized that there was indeed incredible good news which is – Get to work in the kingdom of God. And that is the theme of my sermon today – Get to work in the kingdom of God.

Now at this point you may be tempted to argue with or at least complain about me – how is the demand that we get to work good news? You are telling us to get to work when we are barely keeping our heads above water. Remember all those things you just pointed out that we are dealing with – a pandemic which is affecting every aspect of our daily lives together, that we are so incredibly weary of dealing with, that we are not all on the same page about how best to deal with; raging fires on one coast that have wiped out entire towns, pounding winds and rains on the other coast that have flooded entire neighborhoods painful reminders of the of climate change, a constant barrage of political ads and social media posts that demean and belittle people on the other side of the issues making us wonder if anyone is really telling the truth; and wrestling with the realities of how deeply imbedded racism is in our culture and society. We are just trying to figure out how to have some sense of “normal” in our lives because in the midst of all of this society anxiety and stress, people are still struggling with finances, relationships, illnesses, loneliness, and grief. The image that keeps coming to mind is that we are barely staying afloat in murky, mucky waters that keep threatening to pull us under. To say that the year 2020, which is not yet over, has been a rough year is an understatement. And now you are asking us to do more?!

That is precisely why this command, this demand, this invitation – Get to work – is such good news. Instead of drowning in all the depressing news of the day, we need to lift up our heads and hear this call to get to work in God’s kingdom. Instead of responding to the crisis (the multiple crisis of our day) by getting cynical and reactive, adding more anxiety and divisiveness to the muck about us, instead of arguing about who is right and has the authority to take actions that we may or may not agree with, we are commanded to look up and see the truth that God is in charge. This is God’s kingdom. That is the truth that not only changes the way we see and experience the world around us, but determines how we are going to participate in this world – by getting to work in the kingdom.

In our gospel, why were the chief priests and elder questioning Jesus’ authority – his authority to teach which things? What was he doing that evoked the question in the first place? Well, Jesus was feeding and healing and touching people not because they were good but because they were God’s. He was eating with and welcoming outsiders. He was challenging

the judgements of his day that put some outside of God's love. He was calling people to a way of life where it was about showing mercy and love to the neighbor, not being right, where it was about serving not seeking power and privilege for oneself. In other words, Jesus was revealing the reality of kingdom of God, a kingdom where those who society excluded, demeaned, and dismissed – prostitutes and tax collectors – were not only were welcomed, but welcomed first. He was revealing a new way to live that produced fruits of kindness, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, respect, freedom.

The good news is that not only has this kingdom broken into our world through Christ even if we have a hard time seeing it in the midst of the murky waters, but also that we are called to get to work in those kingdom so that it continues to spread throughout our world, bringing the fruits of the spirit in the midst of the painful challenges and struggles so many people are facing. For there is indeed much work to do these days. This world desperately needs not words but actions of hope, of love, of respect, of care and compassion and we are the ones that God has entrusted to do this work. God has chosen to do this important, life-affirming, life-giving work to us! This work gives us purpose and direction, gives us hope and even joy.

This work is not just the work of our pastors. We call pastors, whether you know it or not, to remind us of our call as baptized people of God, as followers of Christ. We call them to care for and support us when we feel those murky waters pull you down into the muck. But we also called them to remind us – yes, it is tough, I know we different views, different struggles – but there is still work to do; there is a gospel that needs to be shared. We call pastors to challenge us when we lose our focus and get sidetracked by all the noise out there rather than listening listen to the voice of God, which means at times pastors may make us uncomfortable at times and even irritate us. Many years ago at the beginning of my ordained ministry, I was involved in a conflict with some of the leaders of my congregation. I know it is hard to believe that conflict happens in church, right? The bishop at that time came out and listened to all the complaints about me. At the end this is what he told them. I still remember the words after all these years. “Your pastor may be irritating but she isn’t doing anything heretical.” Irritating but not heretical! Not that I want our pastors to simply irritate people. Not that I want to

irritate you this morning. But it is not really about us, whether or not we always feel comfortable. It is about the gospel – and our gospel today is a bit of an irritating, even nagging voice that tells us to quit complaining, arguing, justifying, beating up on each other – and get to work in the kingdom of God, bearing fruits of that kingdom.

Let the waters of our baptism – with the clean, refreshing, life-giving, creation renewing power of God's spirit – flow through us into these murky waters and bring life to others. Let the waters of our baptism flow through our words and actions, the way we treat and speak about others, the way we care for our neighbors and our world – to bring hope and light in the dark waters of these days. The good news is that waters of God's kingdom are indeed flowing out into the world and the good news is that we are called to participate in this renewing of God's world. I think that is great news that we all need to hear. So let's get to work! The kingdom of God is calling. Amen