

Matthew 21:23-32

Once there was a lion. The lion was proud of his mastery of the animal kingdom. One day he decided to make sure all the other animals knew he was the king of the jungle. He was so confident that he by-passed the smaller animals and went straight to the bear. Who is king of the jungle the lion asked? The bear replied, why you are, of course. The lion gave a mighty roar of approval. Next he asked the tiger, who is the king of the jungle? The tiger quickly responded, Everyone knows that you are, mighty lion.

Next on the list was the elephant. The lion faced the elephant and addressed his question, Who is the king of the jungle. The elephant immediately grabbed the lion with his trunk, whirled him around in the air five or six times and slammed him into a tree. The he pounded him onto the ground several times, dunked him under water in a nearby lake and finally dumped him out on the shore. The lion-beaten, bruised and battered struggled to his feet. He looked at the elephant through sad and bloody eyes and said, Look, just because you don't know the answer is no reason to get mean about it! Ah yes, how many of us often live with that kind of self-delusion.

In the church we ask" How can we be the kind of community that God wants us to be? We have learned that this kind of talk may lead us into the gateway to conflict-because we also have to learn how to fight well-but that conflict is the gateway to intimacy and we need to confront with love. The key to this gateway to intimacy is forgiveness.

Why should we work thru conflict and forgive each other? The answer is the extravagant generosity of God.

There are a couple of key ingredients that must be present if any of this is going to work. It is the binding agent that holds the whole recipe together. If we are going to live together as the community of God then we have to learn what the lion needed to learn-humility. So how do you preach about humility? I guess I should say I'm the most humble person I know. I don't think so!

We need to take a moment just to remember that is not me telling you anything. This is us submitting ourselves to what God has to say to us thru scripture. It is my job to help us listen to what God is saying here. In our texts today there are 3 aspects of humility.

First let look at the gospel lesson. Since last week Jesus has latterly crossed over a threshold in his story. He has entered the gate of Jerusalem. We like to call this the Triumphant Entry. He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and people go wild. They're waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna. This is the peak of Jesus' popularity.

Then he goes to the temple and sees that the temple leaders have set up tables where they are selling animals to the pilgrims who have come to town for the best festival. They're basically extorting the poor and making a profit off religious goods. Jesus gets mad and he turns over their tables and says that they've turned his father's house into a den of thieves and robbers.

And then he does something really important. After the dust has settled from his tirade, he shows us what God's people are supposed to be about. He reminds the leaders and touches the untouchable. He reminds the leaders that God is less interested in proper religious ceremony than he is in reaching out to the people in need.

This brings us to the first part of our text in verse 23. The leaders respond to Jesus. They ask, by what authority are you doing this. In other words, Who do you think you are, Jesus?

Here's where we see the first aspect of humility

It's about AUTHORITY.

I have to admit, if I were those religious leaders and Jesus came in and did that to my place of worship, I think I would have reacted the same way.

Let's think of it this way. Imagine that you are the CEO of a big corporation. You've earned the right to be in this position. You're gotten an MBA, you worked your way up the ladder. Then one day some low-ranked office clerk starts spouting off around the office about how he thinks the corporation should be run...and people listen to him. Soon many of the workers are singing the same song and they're starting to make you look like some kind of dinosaur.

What do you do? Now let's say that the corporation is IBM and it is the early 90's. The young employee is a guy who has been tuned onto a new-fangled idea called the internet and he starts telling people that if IBM doesn't get their act together that they'll be left in the dust. That is where the execs at IBM found themselves. They were faced with a choice. Do they protect their authority and power or do they listen to this low-ranking nobody and change their perspective. They listened and they changed and IBM was able to transition into the new world of cyberspace.

When we think about the church and about trying to be the community of God, how often do we run right into this issue of authority and power struggles.

What are the last seven words of the church? WE'VE NEVER DONE IT THAT WAY BEFORE. We think this is MY church, this is how I like it. Don't change anything on me.

Can we be really honest for a minute? Have you ever walked into worship and realized....There's somebody in my seat! When we say it, it sounds silly and petty, but it's true, isn't it. We don't like change, we don't like people challenging our ideas or ways of doing things. I totally get that. Like it or not, the world has changed.

We have to be careful that we don't fall into the same trap that the leaders of Israel did. They were so caught up with their own place of authority and their own perception of what they thought God was like, that they were no longer able to see what God was actually doing right in front of them. God is at work in our world, all around us.

If we are going to be the community of God, then we must be willing to let go of our sense of power and authority and look around at the larger community and ask..What is God doing?

Here's the thing about Authority. We have to remember, it's not our church, it's not our agenda, and it's not our will. It's God's authority, it's God's will, on earth as it is in Heaven. If we are going to live together as God's community, then we need to learn how to let go of our sense of entitlement and reach out to people and ideas that might be a little outside the box.

As you can imagine, the leaders of Israel weren't too excited about this. So, Jesus goes on in our text to demonstrate what he's getting after by telling them a parable about the two sons. It is in the parable that we see the second aspect of humility. It's about ACTION.

The story is pretty simple. The father tells the son to go work in the field and the son says no. In that culture that was a big no-no. Sons did not defy their fathers like that. So, the son was wrong. But then it says he changed his mind and went. The Greek word here for changed his mind is *met-a-melc-mai*. It's really more than changing your mind. It's deeper than that. It's more like he had a heart change. He was moved and realized that he was wrong. The direction of his heart moved from himself to doing what was right.

On the other hand, we have the second son. The father tells him to go work in the field and this son says, yes, sir, right away sir. But then he doesn't do it. We call that lip-service. Jesus asks the leaders of Israel, which one did the will of the father. Here is an interesting observation I've made. In my experience some of the most Christ-like people I've ever known have been my Jewish friends. They have said no to Christianity and yet their lifestyles were marked by caring for the poor, truly listening to others, welcoming the stranger and genuinely loving their neighbor. And some of the meanest and most toxic people I've ever known have been people who have publicly professed with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and claim to know the grace of God in their lives.

Here's the thing about these two sons. They were both wrong. What separates the sons is that the first one was willing to admit that he was

wrong and did something about it. Three of the most difficult words to say is I was wrong.

That is humility. If we are going to live together as the community of God, we need to not just pay lip-service to God, go through the churchy motions and then go on about our self-centered lives. We need to be willing to roll up our sleeves and deal with stuff. We need to own our junk, make peace and get on with figuring out what God is doing around us and get in on the action of being the hands and feet of Jesus to our community. I know this seems like a pretty heavy handed sermon. Believe me, I know this is tough stuff. Remember, I'm preaching to myself here. That's why we desperately need to look at the Philippians text to see the third aspect of humility.

IT'S ABOUT ATTITUDE.

Paul wrote a letter to his friends and said let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Then he give us the ultimate example- let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied him, taking on the form of a slave. Jesus emptied himself. He poured himself out for us. His attitude was not directed to himself. It wasn't ME, MINE. It was you, ours.

Did you catch the news report a while ago about the cross country runner from Andover High School? His name was Josh Ripley. He was running a race. When a high school guy starts out to run a race, there is one thing on his mind and that is winning. At the half mile mark he turned a corner and saw one of his opponents lying on the ground, bleeding badly from his ankle. In that moment Josh did something

amazing. He stopped, picked up his opponent and carried him back to the base to get medical attention. Josh emptied himself of all hope of winning. He put the needs of his enemy above his own. That's what it looks like. That is the attitude of Christ.

How can we live together as the community of God? In our western, American culture we are trained from childhood that life is all about Me, mine and my way. Even our religion is based on MY relationship with God, MY eternal destiny, MY beliefs. If I'm good with God, then I can check that off my list and move on with my life. Here's where the change of heart happens. What if we changed the me, mine and my way to we, ours and God's Way. We are the body of Christ. We need each other. This is our community both in this congregation and in the whole United States. This is God's kingdom and we are called to be God's hands and feet in this world. Living together means sometimes letting go of things. It means admitting when we're wrong and doing something about it. And it means looking out for each other. That is humility. Amen and Amen.