

True Faithfulness
A Sermon on Matthew 21:28-46 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ October 4, 2006

On Thursday morning I dropped off my car for some service work in North Syracuse. My wife couldn't pick me up; she was in Canandaigua helping out with the grandkids. I checked the potential bus routes; it would take almost two hours to get home, including three miles of walking. So I opened up the ride hailing app on my phone and put in my request. About ten minutes later my ride showed up.

My driver was an older man, named Daneen. I sat in the back seat. I noticed Daneen was wearing a cap that said "Air Force Veteran", so I thanked him for his service. Daneen told me he signed up for the Air Force in 1968 when he turned 18. He served in the Air Force for 3 and 1/2 years, including a half year in Vietnam. Daneen explained that the Vietnam War was a completely unnecessary war for the United States. He told me about the history of Vietnam, and the struggle of the Vietnamese people to be independent from their French colonial rulers.

We were so deep in conversation, it seemed like we were just getting started by the time I came to the end of my 20 minute ride. After he drove away I wondered to myself, "Why is it that most of the people who ever served in the Armed Forces of the United States are so wise and thoughtful, while so many of the people at the top of the chain of command behave so foolishly?" Who made the decisions to send millions of Americans to a distant land to fight a war, leading to the deaths of more than 50,000 Americans and 1 and 1/2 million Vietnamese? Those decisions weren't made by people like Daneen. Those decisions were made by Presidents and Defense Secretaries.

If I had to choose between having a twenty minute car ride with a veteran like Daneen, or a twenty minute ride with a former President or Defense Secretary, I would choose the veteran every time. If I spend twenty minutes talking with an active or retired member of the Armed Forces, there's a good chance the conversation will be a sacred time. Unfortunately, the same could not be said regarding the men who send them into battle.

Those who have lots of power often have less integrity. Sometimes they give the impression they think they are above the law, as if they are better than the rest of the people. This is especially shocking in the United States of America, because in the Declaration of Independence the founders of our nation declared, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Those who have been given lots of power are often corrupted by their power.

It works the same way in the church. If you have conversations with some random members of St. Paul's or most other congregations, I have no doubt you will discover the members are people of integrity and deep faith. I feel less confident making a similar prediction about the men and women who lead the church, the religious professionals.

You may have noticed a story about the lack of integrity among religious professionals in the New York Times this week. The Attorney General of the State of Massachusetts investigated hundreds of reports of sexual abuse of children in Roman Catholic churches. The report was issued a few days ago. Over a period of decades 270 Catholic priests abused almost 1000 children, and that was just in a small portion of the state of Massachusetts. Those who have been given lots of power are often corrupted by their power.

It's not just the Roman Catholic Church. I have heard reports about clergy abusing their power in every sort of church you can imagine. A few years ago, one of the priests in our diocese was convicted on charges of stealing large amounts of money from a parish.

Those who have been given lots of power are often corrupted by their power. Those who have power over others develop feelings of entitlement. In their hearts they feel they are better

than others. This is especially shocking in Christian pastors and priests and bishops, because these feelings and actions are directly contradictory to the Gospel message.

This same set of problems with entitled, corrupt leaders is what motivated Jesus' confrontation with the priests and scribes and pharisees in the Temple. Matthew gives an extended account of this clash between Jesus and the religious professionals in chapters 21 and 22.

Last week we read the opening part of this confrontation, where Jesus and the religious leaders trade questions back and forth. In the end the priests and scribes refused to answer Jesus' question because they were afraid of the crowds of people. So Jesus told them three parables directed at their corruption and lack of integrity. Today we are reading the first two of these parables.

The first parable is a parable about the relationship between our words and our actions. Let's notice that the first son answered 'I will not', but later changed his mind and did the work. Our actions speak more powerfully than our words.

The mistake of the second son was that there was no integrity between his words and his actions. The second son is telling a lie. He says he will labor in the vineyard, but he does not go.

Let's notice that when Jesus says, *"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you"* he was not speaking to average, ordinary people. Jesus wasn't giving this message to cab drivers and nurses and sales clerks. When Jesus says 'ahead of you' he was speaking directly to the religious professionals, to the priests and scribes and bishops and pharisees. They were not behaving with integrity.

This is especially appalling because the religious professionals know the Hebrew Scriptures better than anyone else. The priests and the scribes should have been the first ones to recognize that John the Baptist was a prophet sent to them by God, like Jeremiah, Moses and the other prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. They should have been the first ones to respond to John's call for them to repent and be baptized. They should have been the first ones to respond positively to Jesus' message of the coming of God's kingdom. But they rejected John, and they rejected Jesus.

Finally, let's notice Jesus concludes the parable with this sentence: *even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.* We show our faithfulness by our willingness to change our minds. In the Bible they call this repentance. Repentance is our willingness to let our minds be changed by God truth. The tax collectors and prostitutes and cab drivers and librarians are willing to let their minds be changed. The priests and scribes and bishops are so sure of themselves, they are unwilling to admit their mistakes.

The second parable is a parable about ownership and our feelings of entitlement. *There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower.* As with any parable, the story is meaningful on several different levels.

Since Jesus is speaking directly to the priests, scribes and pharisees, let's consider the meaning of the story as it relates to them. Who owns the vineyard? God is the one who planted the vineyard, put a fence around it, installed the wine press, and built a watchtower. The vineyard is the church, or perhaps the vineyard is God's entire kingdom, which is the earth and all of the people. God is the owner of the vineyard.

Who are the tenants, the people working in the vineyard? The priests, the religious professionals are the tenants; they are the people who have made a promise to take care of God's vineyard. But the priests, the scribes and the pharisees are not good tenants. They act like God's vineyard belongs to them. *When the harvest time had come, the owner sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Finally the owner sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'* So the tenants seized the owner's son, threw him out of the vineyard, and

killed him. The story is shocking, in the same way you and I have sometimes been shocked by the behavior of those who lead our churches and our government.

Jesus ends his parable by saying, *Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.* This isn't about the kingdom being taken away from Jews and given to some other religious group; it's about the privilege of leadership being taken away from the priests and bishops and scribes and pharisees and being given to leaders who will be truly faithful to the owner of the vineyard.

God is seeking people who will be truly faithful workers in God's vineyard. The pastors and priests and bishops and scribes have failed to be truly faithful. Jesus' message is that the corrupt leaders of the church and the corrupt leaders of the people will be held to account.

Do not be discouraged by the stories of corruption in the church and the government you are reading and hearing. Do not be surprised when the people in charge of the government or the church behave as if it belongs to them. Do not let your hearts be full of fear when those in power try to force out their opponents or arrest them on false charges.

The people who worship the Lord of love have been surviving and behaving courageously in the face of corruption since Jesus' time and long before that. Find your wisdom and courage in the Gospel of Christ Jesus. The Gospel is a message of empowerment for women and men who have been mistreated by those who wield their power as a weapon. Be strengthened by the God who led the children of Israel out of slavery into freedom. Discover true faithfulness in the people sitting next to you in the pews. Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and despair that clings to us, and run with perseverance the race that has been set before us.