9.27.26 Sermon on Mattew 21:23-32

This past Wednesday, down in our dining room, we hosted the annual Public Policy Forum for the West Virginia Council of Churches. The Council of Churches does this every year, and if you don't know, the West Virginia Council of Churches is an ecumenical body. There are a whole bunch of different denominations that are a part of the Council of Churches, and we come together for this Public Policy Forum to discuss and discern what our shared public policy priorities will be in the upcoming year. For instance, there's often a lot of focus around care for children. Lately, there has been an increased focus on the right to have safe and clean drinking water.

So we gather every year to discern these things together, and at the Public Policy Forum this week, I opened our time together by moderating a panel of four different folks from different denominations asking the question, "What does faith in action mean to you, and what does it look like in your faith tradition?" We had somebody representing the Disciples of Christ tradition, somebody representing the African Methodist Episcopal Church, somebody representing the Presbyterian Church, USA, and somebody representing the Catholic Church on this panel, so there was a diversity of viewpoints.

But despite the differences that we know exist between these denominations, there was a common theme that every single one of those folks talked about: and that is that true faith always leads to action. Faith bears fruit, good fruit, fruit that matters. As began to talk further together about what does faith in action mean, this shared idea came through: namely, that we're to recognize the dignity of every human being. When we do that, that's faith in action. When we care for our neighbors, that's faith in action. When we seek human flourishing for all people, that's faith in action. Caring for the least of these is faith in action.

And so as we had this conversation midweek, I couldn't help but think of the passage that we heard this morning in Matthew 21, because Jesus essentially asked the same kind of question when he said, "Who is actually doing the will of the Father?" Jesus doesn't ask who has said the right thing or who has the right religious credentials. He doesn't ask who looks the most faithful. He asks who is actually doing the work of God.

As we come to this passage, we're getting towards the end of Matthew's gospel. We're moving towards Golgotha where Jesus dies on the cross. What has just happened immediately before we hear this passage? The day before, Jesus had entered into Jerusalem riding on a donkey in that really spectacular piece of street theater. He comes demonstrating that he's a different kind of king. He's humble and he's peaceful, and he refuses to use the symbols of imperial power. So that's the first thing that happened the day before.

And then, as soon as Jesus gets into Jerusalem, he goes where? He goes right to the temple, and he casts out the money changers and those who are buying and selling, and he flips over the tables. He causes this huge disruption to this religious system that had become exploitative of the people who were there to offer up sacrifices, the ones who were there trying to worship faithfully. The temple was supposed to be a place of prayer. It was supposed to be a place where people could encounter God, but instead, vulnerable people were being exploited there. And so Jesus, upon entering into Jerusalem, declaring he's

a different kind of king, immediately goes and disrupts this whole system. Jesus doesn't just preach about justice, he acts. And that cleansing of the temple was certainly an act!

Then, just before Jesus re-enters the Temple at the start of this morning's narrative he encounters a fig tree. He curses the poor fig tree. Why does Jesus do this? The fig tree has leaves. It looks like it's alive, but it is not bearing any fruit. So Jesus curses the fig tree, and this becomes an important image for what immediately follows in today's text. A tree can look like it's pretty healthy, but it can still be fruitless. And religious people, as Jesus shows us today, can look faithful and still fail to bear fruit. And so now, a day later, after that triumphal entry, after turning over the tables in the temple, Jesus reenters the temple and the religious leaders are there to confront him. I'm sure that they were not happy about what had happened to the day before. They want to get to Jesus. They're mad. He's messing up their whole order. He's messing up their whole system. They confront Jesus, demanding, "Who gave you the authority to do these things?"

They want to know who authorized Jesus to teach and to challenge the Temple system. They want to know who gave Jesus the authority to critique them. They were the religious authorities. They want to know who in the world gave Jesus the authority to act in the name of God! And so they ask this question, though I'm not sure that their question is really about seeking the truth. Jesus is a problem, and they want that problem to go away.

Jesus responds to their question by asking them about John the Baptist. He says, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it from human origins?" The leaders refuse to answer him. They know that either way they answer, it will cause problems. They're more concerned about the consequences of their answer than about recognizing what God is doing.

But why John? Why does Jesus bring up John in this particular moment? If you recall, John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling people to repentance, to turn around, to change direction, and to prepare the way of the Lord. When we talk about the baptism that John the Baptist was offering, it was a baptism of *repentance*. So Jesus goes on to tell a story to these religious leaders to help them understand the idea of repentance.

In Jesus' story, there were two sons, and the father asks them to go out and to work into the vineyard. The first son, he says, "No, I don't want to do that!" But then he pauses for a minute, changes his mind, and he turns around and goes out to work into the vineyard. The word that's used there in the Greek for that first son's change of mind, *metamelomai,* carries this sense of regret, of truly changing one's mind, of turning, of changing course. It's not just a second thought – it was an act of repentance. He goes. He acts. This first son reminds us that repentance is not simply feeling sorry about what we've done, but then just carrying on in the same way. Repentance is about actually turning around. It's following through on that second thought. It changes the direction of the son's life. He goes from walking away from the vineyard to walking back towards the vineyard.

The second son, however, gives the answer that every parent wants to hear: "Yes, sir! Yes, dad, I will go into the vineyard, and I will work!" But then he never actually goes. He speaks the right words, but he doesn't have the action to back it up.

Jesus asks this question after telling that story: “Which of the two did the will of his father?” The answer is obvious, even to the religious leaders: the first one! He actually did the work. That’s really the heart of this parable. The second son’s problem isn’t that he says something hostile towards the father. His problem is that his right words never actually become right action. He says “yes” with his mouth, but his whole life still says “no.”

I think this raises a question for us. What happens after we say yes to God? We’re often very good at speaking the right words. We know how to say “Jesus is Lord.” We know how to say, “Love your neighbor and welcome and care for the poor.” We know how to say, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” But then Jesus asks us, after we say all of these things, are we then going to the vineyard to work? Are we backing up those words with our lives? Who is actually doing the will of God?

Jesus tells the religious leaders, “Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven before you.” That had to be a gut punch to the religious leaders. Here are the most “unworthy” groups of people, the ones who are clearly not doing right – and they’re going to enter the kingdom of heaven before them. Why? And it’s not because Jesus is declaring that their behavior is irrelevant; Rather, he’s saying that those who respond and turn, the ones who have actually changed direction, are doing the will of God. Jesus regarded both groups, religious leaders and the chief priests, as well as the tax collectors and prostitutes as God’s children. There are two sons in the story. They’re both sons of the father. But their actions, not just their words, reveal who is truly participating in God’s work.

This morning, Jesus puts forth that question to us too. Who is actually participating in God’s work? Are we loving, serving, reconciling, feeding, welcoming, advocating, caring for our neighbors? Are we doing those things or are we just talking about them? Matthew 21 gives us a way to evaluate our claims to Christian faith, because it calls us to look at the fruit, at the actions that stem from our faith. The question isn’t just “Are we using the right language to talk about God?” The question is “What kind of fruit are we producing?”

Today, we can look around and we see that there are sometimes ways in which faith gets employed in ways that do not bear good fruit. Language by itself does not make something Christlike. Proclaiming “Jesus is Lord” with our mouths while not backing it up with action does not make it Christlike. The second son gives us this warning: it is possible to say, “Yes, Lord,” while our actions point in a different direction. It’s possible to possess the correct language, the right beliefs, or the religious identity while still producing destructive actions or bad fruit. It is possible, and it happens all the time.

I started reading a book this week by Matthew D. Taylor called Defying Tyrants. In it, he looks at the state of our world and the long history of the way that church and empire have been wedded together in unholy matrimony. He said this, which really stuck to me. “Yet the armies of Christendom and the proponents of Christian imperialism also say the orthodox Nicene Creed. Heresy is a category that’s about creeds and formal beliefs, but not every problem in Christianity is inherently creedal. These Christian villains of history speak the right theology, but they perpetuate horrors.” Correct words are not sufficient evidence of faithful discipleship. Our beliefs matter. Our creeds matter, certainly. But they have to actually become embodied in the way that we live, otherwise, they’re empty.

And so Jesus, in telling this story, challenges us to ask ourselves, does our faith produce love of neighbor? Does our faith help us to recognize the dignity of every human being? Does it help us make room for the stranger or to care for the least of these? Does it help us to live lives oriented towards mercy? Does it help us to make peace? Does our faith lead us towards repentance, towards humility? Or is our faith producing things like fear or exclusion or contempt? Is it producing scapegoating, dehumanization, domination, or political idolatry? These are questions that we have to ask ourselves. The deep danger here is to confuse the kingdom of God with the interests of any other kingdom.

Jesus calls us to follow him, and he calls us to have lives that are shaped, formed, and impacted by that journey with him. We don't need right words alone. We belief that lead to right action.

So what does faith that bears fruit look like? Faith repents. We need to be willing to say, "I was wrong, I need to change, I have to turn around. I've had a second thought and I am changing my mind."

Faithfulness looks like that faith loves the neighbor, not just people who agree with us, look like us, vote like us, or worship like us. Jesus calls us beyond all of those boundaries that we naturally create.

Faith protects human dignity. Every person bears the image of God. Our faith should be evident in the fruit of our language, of how we talk to and about other people.

Faith serves. Jesus' model of power is not domination, it's service and faith. Faith asks us, "Who needs us? Who's being left behind? Where can we participate in God's work? Where can we go into the vineyard and do what the father has asked of us?"

Faith bears fruit for the least of these. Matthew's Gospel, as we've seen over many weeks, continually points our attention towards those with the least amount of power. Are the people on the margins experiencing the fruit of our faith in Christ?

It's really easy for us to read this text and to think it is about somebody else – hypocritical religious leaders, or politicians, or whoever. Maybe with people who misuse Christianity for their own purposes. But Jesus is talking to all religious people here, including us. He's asking us, how have we disconnected from the "Yes" to God in our lives? Where have our right thoughts or beliefs exceeded our compassion? Where in my Christian identity have I ceased to love in the way that God loves me? Where have I become more concerned with being right than with being faithful? And where is Jesus asking us to stop, to have a second thought and to turn around so we can do the work of God?

Earlier this week, as I asked that question of other faith leaders, what does faith in action mean? This passage gives us a pretty simple answer. It means to go to the vineyard. It means to repent, to turn around, to love our neighbor, to care for the least and practice mercy and seek justice, to serve rather than to dominate, and to make our faith visible through our whole lives – not only in our words, but in our actions too. The second son says, ""es, Lord," but then he never goes. The first son says, "No, I'd rather not," but then he turns around and he does go to the vineyard.

The good news is that the first son reminds us that our first response does not have to be our final response. We can, in fact, change. We can, in fact, turn around. We can go back to the vineyard that we have passed by.

What fruit is our faith producing? Who is experiencing that fruit? Are we truly participating in God's work? The question is not simply if we have said "Yes" to God. The question is whether our lives are evidence that we mean it when we say it. Amen.