

KID: "I feel like you're always making up rules and stuff."

DAD: "Like what?"

KID: "Like if I don't clean my room a portal will open and take me to another dimension."

DAD: "Well that's what happened to your older brother."

KID: "What older brother?"

DAD: "Exactly!"

Today we hear what is probably the most outrageous verse in the New Testament, but how did we get there? Just before this text, Jesus was challenged by the scribes and pharisees – "By what authority do you do what you do and say what you say?" This comes right after Jesus has triumphantly entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, and then cleansed the temple by making a big mess. Yeah, the authorities were upset alright. And Jesus tells a parable. Jesus calls the 'two sons' 'children.' Israel was often referred to as God's sometimes rebellious children. The vineyard is an Old Testament symbol for Israel. Jesus, in telling this story, is enticing His listeners into a consideration of just where they stand in the ongoing story of God and His people, Israel.

Jesus contrasts action versus word. Jesus and His critics agree that one son does what the father wants: the son who at first said 'no,' but then still goes to work in the vineyard. Actions speak louder than words. Jesus exposes the reality that although the leaders have high regard for John, their high opinion of his ministry didn't lead to action. Jesus' ministry is based upon an authority that matches words with actions and results and outcomes. He regathers the scattered tribes of Israel and restores Israel through the great works of healing and release from demonic powers. Sinners are being invited into table fellowship. The fruit of Jesus' work is there for all to see if they open their eyes. His AUTHORITY is in His words AND actions, and the scribes and pharisees don't respond either to Jesus' words or His actions.

And so He zings them with that outrageous statement: "The tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God's kingdom ahead of you." Sinners, harlots, crooks get to go into God's kingdom before us good people – people who meticulously keep the law?

If we wonder why things ended so horribly for Jesus in a week that began so well, how we get from a Palm Sunday parade to a Friday crucifixion, here's how. You can't say things like that to people on the top, people at the center, people in the know – people like most of us – and get away with it.

The insiders, the first in line, they had all the right answers, believed all the right things. They ask questions of others because they've got the answers. They are better at believing the right things than actively doing the right things. (all adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, p. 3-5, Oct-Dec 2023)

So what's the point? It is one thing to know the content of the Bible; it is another thing to act according to its message of love, compassion and forgiveness. There were lots of Bibles in South Africa, yet the oppressive apartheid regime persisted. Likewise, there were lots of Bibles in Nazi Germany, yet the Holocaust still happened. There are tons of Bibles in the United States, and thanks to the Gideons, there is a Bible even in every hotel room, and we're still not following the gospel on welcoming the oppressed, the hungry, the needy, the immigrant despite what it says in the Bible AND the teaching of the church – AND even our beloved Statue of Liberty – and we're still coming to church and arguing about it.

We should not underestimate how our actions or inaction have an impact on those around us: "Of one hundred people, one will read the Bible; the 99 will read the Christian." (Dwight L. Moody)

God reveals His will to us not so that we may engage in protracted, esoteric debates about it. Rather God's will is imparted to us so that we might act upon it. "Truth is given, not to be contemplated, but to be done. Life is an action, not a thought." (Frederick William Robertson). The proof is in the pudding when it comes to our faith. At the end of our lives, God isn't going to ask, 'What did you dream? What did you think? What did you plan? What did you preach?' He's going to ask, 'What did you do?' (Michel Quoist) And specifically, what did you do about the least of these, because whatever you did – or did not do – for them, you did – or did not do – for me.

Here are some thoughts from a book entitled IF GOD IS LOVE, DON'T BE A JERK. And this particular piece is from a chapter entitled THE CHURCH OF NOT BEING HORRIBLE: "Jesus spent much of His life with both conservatively and liberally religious people, a great deal of it with nonreligious people – and ALL of it with non-Christians. He set in motion a revolution of radical hospitality and counterintuitive love that defied precedent and confounded those who imagined themselves righteous. (It led to a) moment in the gospel where the slim man of Nazareth is so frustrated that He says "The tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." In other words, Jesus is saying, "These people, the ones you judge and condemn and look down on – because their sins are public, or their lives are labeled illegal, or their poverty condemned as laziness – THEY'RE getting it. THEY have my heart. YOU'RE the ones who are lost!" He was warning the self-righteous that their punitive religion and its toxic arrogance had become a millstone around their necks, and that what He was building would be built without them -- unless they could be internally altered to the point that humility made them more welcoming. Little has changed in 2000 years. Now, just as then, many church-goers, commandeering the name of God have become the very thing Jesus warned the world against. We've become infected with hypocrisy, greed, and contempt – and this is preventing people from seeing anything resembling the abundant life Christ preached about. Just as when His feet were on the planet, Jesus is telling us that God has outgrown the box we've tried to build for Him, and we'd better be open to a new thing because this old thing is no longer life-giving. (John Pavlovitz, p. 192-193) This is essentially the message of Pope Francis.

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Third, in James McBride's novel THE HEAVEN AND EARTH GROCERY STORE, he tells a story that has the same message as this parable. McBride's story takes place on Chicken Hill, a dilapidated neighborhood in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, where immigrant Jews and African Americans live side by side, clinging to the dream of equality in their new homeland. It is 1925, Moshe Ludlow has just opened his dance hall and theatre to Black musicians. Despite the opposition of the town's White power brokers, the theatre is prospering. Moshe's wife, Chona, a beautiful woman who's driven by her Jewish faith and her chronic limp from childhood polio, runs the Heaven and Earth Grocery Store downstairs from their small apartment. The little grocery costs more money than it takes in – that's because Chona allows many of Chicken Hill's poor Black and European immigrant residents to take out lines of credit that she never asks them to make good on.

To Pottstown's 'Christian' establishment, the residents of Chicken Hill are a necessary source of cheap laborers and housekeepers. The town's racist doctor calls them 'wine stains on the white American tablecloth.' But despite their struggles, Chicken Hill is the epitome of American inclusiveness, caring – and love. Chona's store is the meeting place of the diverse Chicken Hill community of shoemakers and maids and factory workers, of gangsters and petty criminals. All are welcomed at the Heaven and Earth Grocery Store. When the state wants to institutionalize a 12-year-old Black boy who's been branded 'deaf and dumb,' the Heaven and Earth patrons come together to take on the powerful state to save the boy from being warehoused for life.

As they begin to prosper, Jewish families move off Chicken Hill to Pottstown proper. Moshe wants to join the exodus, but Chona will not hear of it. Moshe points out the kitchen window of their apartment above the store and shouts, "Down the hill is America!" But Chona is adamant: "America is HERE."

While Chona's goodness endears her to Moshe, it also exasperates him. "The area is poor. Which we are not," Moshe says. "It is black. Which we are not. We are doing well!" But Chona counters, "Because we SERVE, you see? That is what we do. The Talmud says it. We must serve." (CONNECTIONS, 1 October 2023, p. 1-2)

It's what Jesus says too. Which of the brothers did the will of the father? The one who WENT INTO THE VINEYARD AND ACTUALLY DID SOMETHING. We'll be judged on what we have done – or not done – in service to others, especially those most vulnerable, in service to the Owner of the Vineyard. Amen.