

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 8, 2023

Kingdom Citizens

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let's start with a quick recap of the literary context of our Gospel text for today. This chapter of Matthew's gospel begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem in triumph, then in the very next scene he is driving the money-changers and dove-sellers out of the temple. It comes as no surprise then, that after entering the city as a Davidic king and attacking long established religious systems of exclusion and control, the religious leaders are upset and questioned Jesus' authority to do these things.

To use the language from my sermon last week, Jesus takes very righteous and authoritative actions that are clearly in line with the values of God. Jesus responds to the questioning of his authority with a parable that illustrates that authority is righteously exercised in action as opposed to words.¹ Both sons are granted agency and authority to care for the vineyard, but only one does so. Anyone who is serving the values of God is taking righteous and authoritative action since all authority comes from God. The inverse is also true, authority exercised in ways that are not in line with the values of God are unrighteous and therefore not rightly exercised authority.

The verse that precedes our text for today becomes something of a linchpin for both the parable of the two sons and the parable of the wicked tenants. Matthew 21:32 reads, "For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him, and even after you saw it you did not change your minds and believe him." This verse is key in light of the chief priests and elders' response to today's parable: the thought that the vineyard will be given to other tenants.

The Kingdom of God is reserved for people, tenants, who produce its fruits. And what are the fruits of the kingdom? The values of God: justice, love, mercy, grace, peace, inclusion, connection, community, wholeness, *shalom*.

¹ Matthew 21:28-32 (NRSVUE)

Given both authority and agency by God, do we exercise them in line with these kingdom values?

Whether or not we use the authority and agency granted to us in righteous ways is largely dependent upon our experience of God's values. We are all in desperate need of God's grace, however we are also adept at deluding ourselves into thinking we aren't. And when we are unable to see our own brokenness, our own need for grace, we are prone to wanting to limit God's grace towards others. Heaven help us if we are in positions of power and influence with this attitude!

This is at the heart of the conflict between Jesus and the chief priests in this chapter. The religious leaders of the time had established systems of power and control to limit the people's access to God. Those systems were exclusionary, not in line with the values of God, and therefore unrighteous and non-authoritative.

In many ways it all boils down to what we want for our neighbors. Do we want our neighbors to experience the love and grace of God, or not? Martin Luther describes this using the language of citizenship. In his "Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament" Luther writes: "[the sacrament of Holy Communion] is like a city where every citizen shares with all the others the name, honor, freedom, trade, customs, usages, help, support, protection and the like, of that city, and on the other hand shares all the danger of fire and flood, enemies and death, losses, imposts and the like. For he who would have part in the common profits must also share in the losses, and ever recompense love with love. Here we see that whoever wrongs a citizen wrongs the entire city and all the citizens; whoever benefits one deserves favor and thanks from all the others."²

If our citizenship truly is in the Kingdom of God, we will want for everyone around us the same benefits that we experience and desire for ourselves. The theology of the cross drives us to despair of our own ability to live as we were made to live; instead, it is solely through God's grace that our brokenness is overcome. If, as a citizen of the Kingdom of God, I expect overwhelming love and grace from God, I must expect and desire that same for my neighbor. The chief priests and elders had no such desire for the tax collectors and prostitutes, and so they exclude themselves from experiencing the overwhelming expansiveness of God's grace.

² Luther, Martin. Schindel, J.J. (translator). "Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament." p.11. 1519.
<http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/LutherTreatiseontheBlessedSacrament.pdf>

Let's take a moment now and apply this in a real and practical way. Lift your heads up, take a look around you, see some of your neighbors gathered here with you today. Now ask yourself, what do I want for my neighbor? What do you hope your neighbors gathered around you now, experience from God this morning? In a few moments you will come to the Lord's Table; as you make your way up ask yourself what you expect your neighbor to receive from the bread and the wine. Is it the same forgiveness, grace, and love that you hope for yourself? Or something else?

Perhaps this exercise is a little too easy. We are gathered here today with our community of faith, neighbors with whom we share a great deal. But let's place ourselves in the shoes of the chief priests and the elders. Who are the tax collectors and prostitutes in our neighborhoods? Who are the people we are tempted to look down on and judge as unworthy? Who might we think is undeserving of God's love and grace?

Is this neighbor someone who disagrees with you politically or ideologically? Is this neighbor someone who believes differently than you about God and faith? Does this neighbor look different than you? Speak different? Love different? What do you want for these neighbors? Do you still want God's unconditional love and grace for them? Or do we find ourselves tempted to exercise our authority towards these neighbors the way the chief priests and elders did, wanting to exclude them from what we hope for ourselves?

Luther has some hard words for us here, quoting again from his "Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament": "For this reason slanderers and those who wickedly judge and despise others cannot but receive death in the sacrament, as St. Paul writes (1 Cor. 11:29). For they do not unto their neighbor what they seek from Christ and what the sacrament indicates; they wish them no good, have no sympathy with them, do not receive them as they desire to be received by Christ... What concerns [Christ] most, especially in this sacrament, is that faith in the fellowship with Him and with His saints may be rightly exercised and become strong in us, and that we, in accordance with it, may rightly exercise our fellowship with one another. This purpose of Christ they do not perceive and, in their devoutness, they daily say and hear mass, and remain every day the same; nay, become worse daily, and mark it not."³

To expect God's love and grace for ourselves but not for others is sin. It is setting a stumbling block of our own judgment between others and God. And Christ warns us firmly against causing others to stumble. The chief priests and elders condemn themselves with their exclusionary use of the authority

³ Ibid. p.21

and agency granted to them by God. May we learn from their cautionary example!

God intends salvation for all people. God's overwhelming and unconditional grace and love are meant for all people! The Kingdom of God welcomes tax collectors and prostitutes, as well as chief priests and elders! The Kingdom of God welcomes you, as well as your neighbors! And to try to exclude others from God's Kingdom only results in excluding ourselves from knowing and experiencing the true expansiveness of the love and grace to be found there. So open your eyes and look around you, try to truly see your neighbors. And having done so, know that your desires for them have an impact on you too. You will only know the true breadth and depth, the overwhelming and unconditional expanse of God's love and grace, when you know it is for your neighbor too. Amen.