

Sermon
March 17, 2019

Covenant Presbyterian Church
Rev. Zeta T. Lamberson

Second Chances
Matthew 21:23-46

Our passage of scripture this morning takes place in the Temple in Jerusalem. Just a day before Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey to the shouts of *“Hosanna to the Son of David.”* Matthew recorded that when the people asked *“Who is this?”* the response was that Jesus was a prophet from Nazareth. Upon arrival Jesus entered the temple and caused a stir as he overturned the tables of the moneychangers. While there he also cured the blind and the lame and raised the ire of the chief priests and scribes. So it is no wonder that when he returned to the temple the next day the chief priests and the elders were waiting to question him. And their question went to the heart of their issues with him - *“By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?”* After all the temple was their jurisdiction!

In typical rabbinical fashion Jesus answered their question with a question - a question that at first glance may seem simple but it unpacks so much more! *“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”* In other words who authorized John to baptize? Now the chief priests and scribes were in a bind. For John was widely recognized as a prophet sent from God. As a matter of fact Jesus himself had identified John as a prophet sent to prepare the way for the one who was coming. Herod had feared him as a prophet and yet had beheaded him. And most importantly to the chief priests and the scribes the crowds regarded John as a prophet and they were afraid of an uprising just as the Passover festival was beginning. So they answered *“We do not know.”* And this response allowed Jesus not to answer them....but Jesus did not stop there. He told two parables - actually three - but we are only going to look at two today. And through these parables Jesus ultimately answered the chief priests and the elders question and they did not like his answers.

The first parable was very simple. There were two sons - Jesus talked a lot about two sons. He asked each of them to go and work in the vineyard. The first son said no, I have other things to do. But later he changed his mind and went. The second son responded immediately - Yes, I will go. But then did his own thing and never worked a minute. The question Jesus posed to them was "*which of the two did the will of the father?*" That was easy the chief priests and scribes thought - the first son. Jesus said you are right. And this is what you need to see. The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came and showed you the way but you acted like the second son - you gave lip service to John's requests but you did not act. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn't care enough to change and believe him.

And before the chief priests and the scribes could fully comprehend what Jesus was saying Jesus told another parable. This time there was a landowner who planted a vineyard and then leased it to tenants. When harvest time came the landowner sent servants to collect his due. The tenants killed the servants. The landowner sent more and the same thing happened. Then he sent his son and the tenants killed him too. The question "*When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?*" Once again the chief priests and scribes think they know the answer. They respond he will kill them and find others who will follow his instructions. They don't even realize what they have said until Jesus once again laid it all on the line - "*The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to people that produce the fruits of the kingdom.*" Suddenly they realized that Jesus was talking about them - they were the tenant farmers who had not followed God's instruction. Is it any wonder that they wanted to have Jesus arrested? He was threatening all that they stood for. But what kept them from arresting him at that moment was that the crowds regarded Jesus as a prophet.

And the irony - if John and Jesus were prophets where did their authority come from? From God, of course - and that was their answer to their question but they failed to see it or maybe they saw

it and it frightened them too much to acknowledge it. For to acknowledge that Jesus' authority came from God meant they had to change their ways. And to do that they had to do several things - things that we too are called to do.

First, they had to open their eyes to notice what God was doing around them. They had to be willing even though they had not believed before to change their minds. Just as the first son had done. Jesus was giving them an opportunity just as he did the tax collectors and prostitutes to change - to turn around. Jesus could have just left their inquiry where it was after he refused to answer them. But he didn't. Jesus told the parables because he wanted them to understand. To realize their mistakes and to change. God had sent John to prepare the way - to make the paths straight so that when Jesus came the people would be open to hearing. Jesus wanted the people to understand this. Jesus was their second chance. Another opportunity to turn to God. But they were acting like the tenant farmers and plotting his death instead.

Jesus wanted them to see and understand what they had been doing. For only when we understand what we have done wrong can we change. We are not given details about what caused the first son to change his mind but we do know that John preached about repentance from sins. Have you ever had second thoughts after you said no to something and changed your mind? I know I have. God is always giving us an opportunity - a second chance to understand our mistakes and to change our ways. That is what Jesus was doing when he told these parables to the chief priests and scribes - giving them a chance to change - to repent and begin again.

A pastor in San Diego was called into the sanctuary early one morning. The custodian wanted him to see a strange offering that had been left on the altar. Hanging on the altar were a pair of brown corduroy pants, a belt, a white T-shirt, a pair of tan suede boots, and a note. He noticed blood stains on both the shirt and on the note. The note consisted of only three words, "Please listen God." It was

signed and included a phone number.

The pastor dialed the number. A nineteen-year-old man answered and told his story. He had run away from home and had been wandering in a wasteland of drugs, drifting from one place to another, getting into all kinds of trouble and involved in all kinds of sordid behavior. The night before he had hit bottom. There had been a fight and an almost fatal beating. After making sure the victim of his assault would be all right in the emergency room of a nearby hospital, this young man came to the church, found an unlocked door, and went into the sanctuary. He stayed there all night, crying, and praying. He asked God to forgive him and show him the way to go. All at once the presence of God became real to him. He knew God was there. He felt God's forgiveness. A wonderful peace came over him. He committed himself to Jesus Christ. He was determined to make right the things he had messed up.

The young man felt fresh and clean, like a new person. To symbolize his new life and new commitment, he had put on some new clothes he had with him in his bedroll and had left his old clothes on the altar as a kind of offering, giving God his old life. He walked out the door a new person filled with a new hope, a new life, a new direction. This young man, like the first son in the parable, at one time in his life said "I will not," but later changed his mind and found new life because he came to understand what he had done. (WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS...READ THE INSTRUCTIONS. James W. Moore. Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 1993, pp. 49-50. Retrieved from <https://sermons.com/sermon/when-actions-speak-louder-than-words/1347229>)

When we open our eyes and come to understand our sinful ways we are promised a new life - a new start. A slate wiped clean. We are given a second chance - a chance to start over again. And that opportunity is ours because Jesus died for our sins. When we stand at the foot of the cross acknowledging our sins before God we see the promise that our lives can change. We are given a second chance - an opportunity to live differently. We know it is not as simple as putting on new

clothes. But that is a start for it symbolizes that we have made a commitment to seek to live and act differently because we believe that our God is a God of second chances. And we want to claim that second chance.

But friends, it requires that our actions change not just our words. And I don't know about you but as I witness what is happening in our world today I am convicted that we still have much to learn about acting as Christ calls us to. We must put hate and anger aside. We must seek God's ways and God is a God of love and grace not vengeance and hate. The change that is required in our world begins with each one of us speaking out against what is wrong just as Jesus did. Whenever innocents such as the servants of the landowner are murdered for being faithful - just as the Muslims peacefully praying in the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand were doing - we must recognize it for what it is. Wrong and evil. Christ challenges us to call it what it is and to work to fill the world with people who will produce the kingdom of God. That is what we are called to do as Christians - to live out our lives as faithful tenants who choose God's way and not the ways of the world. That is what Christ was reminding the chief priests and scribes that day so long ago and he continues to remind us. If we don't figure it out God will find others who will. But my friends, in the midst of this warning is a promise. It is the promise that God offers us a second chance - an opportunity to change our minds and change our ways - if only we will respond to his call.

In the early 1990's we were introduced to Veggie Tales. You may remember Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber who retold Biblical stories in new ways. In their recounting of the Jonah story - another story of second chances - there is a powerful song called "Second Chances" that sums up what Jesus was offering the chief priests and scribes and is offering us this day.

You're feelin' pretty blue
You didn't do what God requested!
Yeah, I'd be mopin' too, if I was gonna be digested!
This ain't a pretty picture, no. I said, it ain't a pretty sight, no.

You ran from God this morning and you're ...
Whale chow tonight! But hold up! Hang on!
Not so fast! Your life ain't over yet!
See, we're here to tell you all about ...
the forgiveness that you can get!

You see God's a god of mercy, God's a god of love.
And right now, He's gonna lend a helping hand from up above!

Praise the Lord! He's the God of second chances!
You'll be floored how His love your life enhances!
You can be restored from your darkest circumstances!
Our God is a God of second chances!

Ain't it good to know a God who gives a second chance.
Why, that's enough to get a smile from Mr. Grumpy Pants!
So, if you say you're sorry for all the stuff you do
We know that He'll be ready with a second chance for you!

Praise the Lord! He's the God of second chances!
You'll be floored how His love your life enhances!
You can be restored from your darkest circumstances!
Our God is a God of second chances!

Our God is a god ...
If you believe God's love is true
Then you should know What you should do!

If you believe God's love is true
Then you should know What you should do!

If you believe God's love is true
Then you should know What you should do!

If you believe God's love is true
Then you should know What you should do!

God gives a second chance! Second chances! Second chances!
Praise the Lord! He's the God of second chances!

You'll be floored when you're restored
from your darkest circumstances.
Our God is a God of second chances!
Second chances! Second chances! Praise the Lord!
He is the God of second chances!

You'll be floored when you're restored
from your darkest circumstances.
Our God is a God of second chances!
If you believe God's love is true
Then you should know What you should do!

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Second chances! Second chances!
Praise the Lord! He's the God of second chances!
You'll be floored when you're restored
from your darkest circumstances.
Our God is a god of second chances!

(<https://genius.com/VeggieTales-second-chances-lyrics> from Album Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack))

My friends, if you believe God's love is true then you should know what you should do. The question is will we respond as the chief priests and scribes or as a disciple who believes God's love is true?