

Matthew 21:23-32 Proper 21A

Closing the Gap

Distance: today we hear lots and lots of words that I think speak about distance. Ezekiel speaks to us of that achingly lonely distance between where we sometimes find ourselves in life and that place where we really want to be.

As exiles in a foreign land the Israelites are not only far away from the land they love and know, but they experience themselves as utterly cut off from God and charge God with treating them unfairly.

God is puzzled that even as they lament that God has done them wrong and deserted them, they were in fact the ones, who by their treatment of the poor and outcast, chose the living death of exile over life with God.

Life with God means living in the fullness of God's compassion and mercy and being partners in sharing God's blessings with all. "Turn and live" God pleads, "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone!" Distance: there is often a great distance between what we think we know about God and who in fact God really is.

And Paul speaks of distance as well. As he writes he remembers this wonderful community of Christians in Philippi who has been a beacon of light and hope to the community in which they live. But as time has gone on they find themselves falling into petty bickering and internal divisions. They are no longer working with the unity of purpose and love and Paul pleads with them to get back on track. This is a community of people who really understand the power of Christ's love and they can be a great witness to many, but Paul fears they may forever lose their way. When Christian communities live out of a shared love for Christ and one another, there is no end to our possibilities for being agents of God's hope and mercy.

When we lose our way and forget that we *are* God's people the rest of the world looks at us and decides that if that is what serving Christ is about, they don't want any part of Christianity.

Distance: there is often a great distance between our *potential* as a people of faith versus what it is we *really* do with the gifts we were given.

And Jesus, I think, speaks to us of what can be the greatest distance of all: Today Jesus speaks to us about that great distance that can unfold between the things we *say* and what we actually *do*. This distance that unfolds between our words and our actions can be the most challenging distance of all.

Jesus is standing in the Temple in yet another confrontation with the religious authorities. In the last few days since he first entered Jerusalem he has overturned the tables and thrown out the money changers, he has allowed the unclean—the deaf, the blind and the lame--- to enter portions of the Temple where they were previously not allowed to be---- and he has encouraged children to go running through the Temple precincts singing childish songs to the top of their lungs.

But so often, we automatically want to point to those "horrible" Pharisees and revile their hypocrisy. But let's not jump too quickly. How would we react in this parish if some young dynamic, media craze of a preacher came in this morning and pulled over all the furniture and displays in the Narthex? Not only that but he is followed by all of those homeless folks that we all see every day.

I'm talking about those members of our community who we see standing in the medians at almost every exit on or off of Interstate 5 or Aurora. And I'm thinking specifically. I'm not naming the generic homeless we preachers are so fond of going on about. I'm talking about actual people we see enough to recognize and---- let's admit it---people we try to avoid on a regular basis. But suddenly here they are sitting in the pew right beside us.

And then if that were not disruption enough, he riles up every child in the congregation to run up and down the aisles singing, while all of us good mature folk are trying to sit quietly and have our little piece of God time on Sunday morning.

Now, you tell me, what would you want me to do in the midst of such a disruption to our worship? Wouldn't you look at me pleading for me to make it stop, would you not expect me to *challenge* someone for such actions?

So this morning I just want to be sure not to move too quickly into talking about the hypocrisy of those Pharisees, because in the context of this story, as those who are part of the established religious institution, *we* would be the ones who might most represent the Pharisees!

This morning we are asked to grapple with what it means to realize a much deeper understanding of how we live both *into* and *out of* our faith as those who make up the Body of Christ. Jesus is not content to allow any of us to fool ourselves into thinking that if we talk a good game about the love of God and simply attend church on Sunday that we are living fully into all that is possible with God.

Jesus knows the distance between word and deed can be vast. And what Jesus offers us today is not just another occasion to beat up on ourselves for sometimes falling short; there is no transformation in that exercise. Jesus offers us something far better. Today we are offered the invitation to take hold of the amazing power that belongs to those who proclaim Christ when we not only *claim* faith in God, but live our lives, intentionally and deeply, *out of* this great faith. From the Old Testament Prophet's to Jesus, God has always confronted religious authorities and institutions and asks them to look closely at how they might be going astray.

The first step of course is looking truthfully at our religious structures and beliefs and then to admit that as a people of faith we do not always "walk the walk" as it were. In the light of Christ's love for us we can do this self examination without fear.

Jesus calls to both as individuals and as a religious institution. He exhorts us to move forward in hope and love, and not be victims of either our own past failures or of the fast moving and confusing realities this life can sometimes bring us. And he asks the religious institution to see where it can grow wider with God's mercy and to see where it might be transformed.

Let's just take the present reality that Christianity is shrinking to near extinction in the West. It is real, it is confusing, and it has the power to call mainline Christianity into panic. The promises of God in Christ never included the clause that following God would be easy. Nothing in Jesus' teaching asks us to deny the tough realities the world can sometimes bring. That would not be living in faith that would simply be burying our heads in the sand.

What faith asks us to do is to look at any situation before us and to trust that God's reality is greater than any threat that the transient threat to an institution. As Richard Rohr says "God is always bigger than the boxes we build for God, so we should not waste too much time protecting the boxes."

God is constantly doing new things in our world. The Holy Spirit moves with us now just as way back when---- guiding us and shaping us over time more fully into the people God calls us to be. By truly trusting in this we can act without fear. This does not mean the Church will not be affected by changing conditions in the status quo, we will. But we will not disappear and if we tune our hearts and minds listen to what the Spirit is saying to God's people we may even thrive with new life.

By closing that distance between *what Christians say* about how we trust God and *actually living in that trust* will make all of the difference. This is how no matter where we fall on the spectrum in this latest crisis for the "Church," we can, as a community of faith, be a part of the solution.

We can look at hard realities, but we can do so without the paralyzing fear or the scape-goating that sometimes trips us up. And out of this new understanding the gap between Christ's love for the world and our actions as those who love Christ come crashing together. The distance is closed between what we simply *say* as Christians and what we actually *do* as the people of God in Christ. In the midst of on-going crisis and tumult in the world and the growing irrelevance of the Church in it's wake, we can reach out as never before, we can give as never before, we can witness to God's love as never before, and we can get to know and love one another as never before, we can expand on what it really means to be embraced in Christian community.

In God's world crisis is simply opportunity wrapped in pain.

Any crisis we face has the power to hone and sharpen our focus and it grants us the ability to grow up into the people we always hoped we would be.

In the midst of any challenging time in the history of our Church--- keeping our actions synced to God's will for the human family will continue to grow us into a people of grace.

No matter what problems are erupting in the world or in culture, if we are a people of faith whose actions match our words---we can still grow as a people of generosity, and increase as a people of mercy and wisdom; we can shine as a people who are fearless in sharing Christ's love no matter what the prevailing winds for the institution which bears his title.

We need not be afraid of this time in which we live. This now is our chance; this now is our time. As a family of faith let's continue to move boldly to close the gap between our yes and our no and truly *be* God's people. Amen.

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