

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We officially passed from summer into fall this past week and so my goal of building my shed this summer has not fully been realized. But it's close! I'm ready to put the doors on, one of the last steps, but I discovered on Friday that the lag screws I bought to put the hinges aren't quite long enough to go into the door frame, so I have to take them back and get longer ones. That's the downside of not buying a kit with all the right hardware included. There are a lot of extra trips to the hardware store. The up side is that I'm convinced the quality of my final product will be much better than if I had bought a kit. One of the reasons I went this route is that I want this shed to be able to withstand our prairie weather, especially the high winds we sometimes get here. I've seen videos of sheds rolling across yards and into houses, and I am determined that my shed won't be one of those. So it's bolted to six posts sunk nearly three feet down into the ground and embedded in concrete. The roof framing is attached with hurricane straps, and by a stroke of luck I ended up getting a good deal on heavier-duty siding that I'd originally planned on. I'm confident that this shed will be able to withstand pretty much anything our Central-Illinois weather will be able to hurl at it, short of a tornado, of course. But the truth is, only time and rough weather will tell whether my confidence is well-placed.

This is yet another connection I've discovered between my shed building and the times we are living in, in light of our readings today. It will take me a minute to make that clear, but I hope you'll find too that it makes a good illustration. Some people believe that we are living in apocalyptic times these days, by which they mean the kind of catastrophic, end-of-the-world scenes that play out in the book of Revelation. Many people, on both sides of our polarized political divide, are sure that our American way of life is under threat, that our experiment in democracy is ending. They just differ in the details of what they fear. Some fear that we are in danger of slipping into socialism, imagining the failed states of the former Eastern Bloc. Others fear creeping autocracy, a president with no meaningful checks or balances, imagining Adolph Hitler's subversion of democracy in Germany. The weeks and months to come will reveal whose fears are realized, or whether something else might be in store for us. And that revealing is one of the meanings of apocalypse, which is just the Greek word for revelation, and the Greek name for that last book of the Bible.

Turbulent times reveal not only what the future holds. They also reveal the present. More specifically they have a tendency to reveal the true nature and character of the people who live through them. There's the connection to my shed and its weather resistance. The next big wind storm will reveal its structural integrity, or lack thereof, just like turbulent times reveal what kind of people we are. And that's what is going on behind the scenes in our readings today.

That's most obvious in our Gospel reading from Matthew. Jesus is teaching in the temple when the chief priests and the elders question his credentials. Did you notice that their question isn't about whether his teaching is right or wrong? It isn't. It's about whether he should be allowed to teach in the first place. They know that if they make the question about him and his authority, then they won't have to deal with the *content* of what he is saying. Because they don't want to deal with the content of his teaching. They know that that's about repentance, changing hearts, and minds, and behaviors. But when the status quo is working for you, you don't want change. Just before our reading today Jesus had gone into the temple grounds and disrupted the temple's business by overturning the tables of the money-changers and chasing out those who

were selling sacrificial animals. Jesus' call for repentance is a threat to the religious establishment, just as John the Baptist's call for repentance had been a threat. The chief priests and the elders are effectively saying to Jesus, and by extension to John, "you're not the boss of us! You can't tell us what to do." And by this tactic of deflecting, or side-stepping what should have been obvious was God's message, the religious leaders are revealing who they really are: agents of their own self-interest rather than agents of God's redemption. For the original audience of Matthew's Gospel this would have been even more obvious, because by that time the Romans had put down a rebellion in Judea, sacked Jerusalem, and destroyed the temple.

Jesus' parable about the two sons reinforces the point. The chief priests and the elders were the ones claiming to do the work of the father. In today's terms, they would be the people who are happy to tell you how much they love the Lord, and what good Christians they are. And they might even be sincere. They might really believe their own story. Personally, I would never be so crass. I don't talk about what a good Christian I am. But I might hint at it. I might convey it in different ways. After all, here I am, criticizing "some Christians," all the while subtly letting you know that I'm not one of *those* kinds of people. I'm giving you the impression that I'm the *right* kind of Christian and that *my* motives are pure. But are they? This my job. It's how I earn my keep. And for the moment at least I'm still employed. Are my self-interests involved in how I practice my faith, and how I preach and teach? You bet they are. Am I doing a good job of saying "I go, sir," without always delivering on my promise? Undoubtedly.

Those are pretty easy questions to answer when it comes to people like me. But I'd ask you to ask the same questions of yourself, you who are not pastors or church professionals. Is your own practice of your faith similarly compromised? Do you put on a good show for yourselves and others, without always producing the fruits of the spirit that God has created you for – you know, love, joy, patience, kindness, self-control? How are you doing with those? Are you clear about the line between evangelism and self-promotion? I have a hunch that if you really engage this parable of Jesus and are honest about yourself, you'll find that your motives, too, are not entirely pure, that you often resemble the second son rather than the first.

The only good news in this Gospel reading today is for the prostitutes and tax-collectors, those who recognize their sin and their failings and who rely on the extravagant grace and mercy of God that is so beautifully laid out in our second reading from Philippians. In troubled times, in the storm of life and all of its competing claims on us and our loyalties, Jesus proves himself to be precisely the opposite of you and me. He does not seek his own advantage. He does not rely on his divine status, or image, or prerogatives. He gives all of that up for the sake of others, and at great cost to himself. He empties himself into the harsh reality of human life, joining himself to our nature and our lot, even to our mortality, so that God might create a future for us where there was no future before, a light in the darkness, hope beyond hope. In Holy Baptism, Jesus becomes for us the firmest of foundations that we get bolted to by the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. Storms are coming. Storms are always coming. But in Jesus Christ we have a shelter from every storm, and a foundation upon which God is building a new creation. May God grant us grace to hold tightly to that foundation, trusting in the promises of our baptism. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.