

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

We have turned the corner into fall in the past ten days. There is a noticeable change in temperature, and a noticeable shortening of the days. Winter is coming, as they liked to say in *Game of Thrones*. Today it's also noticeable that we have turned the corner in the Gospel of Matthew that we are reading through this year. The end is drawing near for Jesus. He has entered Jerusalem, where he has told his disciples several times now that he will be handed over to the authorities and put to death. And he has done some things there that seem calculated to make sure that that happens. Just before our reading today, Jesus went onto the temple grounds and drove out the money changers, who were there taking advantage of the ritual scruples of the Israelites that did not allow them to purchase the animals they needed for their sacrifices with coins bearing the images of people or animals – the Roman coins they used in their everyday lives. The money changers provided them with temple currency for that purpose. So, they were providing a service. But they were also serving themselves, taking an unfair cut of the transaction in return. This was not service, but exploitation. Repentance was needed, a change of heart and attitude, and Jesus was pretty in-your-face about it. His end was near.

Some people believe that the end is near for us too, that we are living in apocalyptic times, 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, rule by leaders with no meaningful checks or balances, imagining Adolph Hitler's subversion of democracy in Germany. The next year 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. And that's what is going on behind the scenes in our Gospel reading today. 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 the behaviors that proceed from them. But when the status quo is working for you, you don't want change. The chief priests and elders are in that camp. And Jesus' turning over tables and calling for repentance is a threat to them, just as John the Baptist's call for repentance had been a threat before he was killed. The chief priests and the elders are effectively saying to Jesus, and by extension to John, "you are not in charge here, we are! Don't you dare try to change anything!" 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.

Jesus' parable about the two sons reinforces the point. The chief priests and the elders were the like the son claiming to do the work of his father but not actually doing it. 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? Or do my self-interests play a part here too? This my job, after all. It's how I earn my living. Do my self-interests affect how I practice my faith, and how I preach and teach? I think it's a pretty safe bet that they do. So am I also like the son who says, "I go, sir," without always delivering on my promise? Undoubtedly.

Those are maybe easier questions to answer when it comes to people like me. But I would urge 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 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? And do you also like to complain about those *other* kinds of Christians who don't model the love of God very well while claiming that *our* kind of Christians are more caring and accepting? Is this how you are loving your neighbor as yourself? 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, and that you often resemble the second son more than the first.

In fact, the only good news in this Gospel reading today is for the prostitutes and tax-collectors, the most despised sorts of people in respectable society, but the ones who have come to recognize their sin and their failings and to 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 storms of life and all of the 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 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 upon which the Holy Spirit can build us up by the gift of faith.

That is not a painless process. As Dale and Eileen know all too well from their house fire back in March, sometimes you have to do a lot of tearing down before rebuilding can happen. That tearing down is what the second son in Jesus' parable has done, repenting of his past actions and attitudes. It is what the prostitutes and tax collectors who have been hanging out with Jesus have done as well. And they have been able to do that because by the grace of God they have come to trust that Jesus is the solid foundation upon which they can be built. Their trust in that foundation has given them the courage to face the truth about themselves, to let go of their past, and to be opened to the future that God has in store for them. It is what both John the Baptist and Jesus have been calling for all along, and now it is showing up in all sorts of unexpected places.

If the fire at the Herrstroms had revealed that there was also a sinkhole below their house, they probably would not have decided to rebuild there. But they have a good foundation, and the rebuilding is almost done. Sisters and brothers in Christ, we too have a good foundation, and our rebuilding is well underway. May God grant us grace to hold tightly to that foundation, trusting in the promises of our baptism, so that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus through whatever is yet to come. Amen.