

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

We have turned the corner into fall in the past week. We had a beautiful view of the full harvest moon as we drove back from St. Louis yesterday, and the combines out in the fields. Today we have also turned a corner in Matthew's Gospel. 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 to help with purchasing the animals needed for temple sacrifices. The problem was that Roman money couldn't be used for that. You see, Roman money bore the images of people and animals, which were forbidden in Jewish piety. They might be forced to use that currency in their daily lives, but to use it in the temple felt like blasphemy. So, the money changers exchanged Roman coins for temple currency to avoid that offence. They were providing a service. But they were also serving themselves, taking advantage of a captive audience and exacting an unfair cut of the transaction in return. This was exploitation under the guise of service. It's not unlike Ticketmaster and their arrangement with concert venues to corner the market on ticket sales, which has just recently, at long last, been ruled an illegal monopoly. Jesus' dramatic challenge to such corruption right there in what was supposed to be God's house aligns with the focus of Jesus' public ministry right from the start: repentance. God seeks a change in heart and attitude among God's people. This had, of course, been John the Baptist's message too, and that did not end well for John. Now Jesus is facing the same kind of pushback. The end is 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, even if they differ in the details. Still others see an existential threat in human-caused climate change.

Turbulent times reveal not only our fears about the future. They can also reveal our priorities in the present. More specifically, they tend to expose 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'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. This kind of thing happens in our own legal system. A case can be dismissed because the ones bringing it are ruled to not have "standing," and so the complaint – which could be legitimate – is not addressed.

They know that Jesus' teaching is 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 had been. 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 like the son claiming to do the work of his father but not actually doing it. In today's terms, they might be 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. But at the same time they don't notice how their lives and attitudes don't quite align with those of Jesus, that their behaviors reveal different allegiances. 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. I might, for instance, point out the hypocrisy of "those sorts of Christians," and make sure you know that *I'm* not one of *them*. I'm the *right* kind of Christian. *My* motives are pure. But are they? Or do my self-interests play a part here too? This is 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, you know, like *our* kind of Christians do? 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 are not entirely pure, and that you too 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 despising them and their particular sins helps deflect attention from how the respectable folks might be complicit in their sinfulness. And deflecting helps the status quo, don't you know, and hides the need for repentance. The irony is that it's the despised ones who have come to recognize their sin and their failings, and their need for a change in their way of life. And in their encounter with Jesus they have begun to rely on the extravagant grace and mercy of God that is so beautifully laid out in our second reading from Philippians. Philippians was written to a community that was facing similar kinds of authority issues, with different parties vying for status and honor, each pursuing their own agenda at the expense of the other. Jesus, writes Paul, proves himself to be precisely the opposite of our social and personal instincts. He does not seek his own advantage. He does not rely on his 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 conflicted reality of human life, joining himself to our corrupted nature and to our mortality. And this divine self-emptying becomes the means by which God is creating a future for us where there was no future before.

We do indeed face existential threats, individually, as a nation, and even as a planet. And we should not minimize those threats. But we can face them knowing that in Jesus God has joined Godself to us, to work in us the change of heart and attitude that we are incapable of on our own, so that our hearts and our lives might be opened to one another and the world God loves and will not give up on. That is a promise we can trust, a promise that will put the mind of Christ in us, and give us the peace of God, the peace that passes all understanding, that will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.