

Sermon for Monday, February 2, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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It's another week
in the gospel according to St Matthew,
another week,
and another one
of Jesus'
parables.
But the stakes are higher
this time round.

Last year, when we read parables
in the gospel according to St Luke
they came one after another,
all clustered together,
each parable
interpreting and expanding
on the one before,
a season of storytelling.

But Matthew's gospel is different.
In Matthew, the parables are scattered across the pages,
scattered across the life
of Jesus,
and rather than interpreting one another,
they tend to function as theological punctuations
of what is happening
as Jesus travels around the countryside
and into the cities,
Jesus offering a kind of down home commentary
on what he observes.

And so each time we see a parable
we need to look
at what has just happened.
What is it
that Jesus is commenting on?
Is it a specific question or challenge?

Or is it, like last week,
a series of interactions
that all point
in the same direction?

When we heard from Jesus last week
he has traveled from Galilee, up in the north of the Holy Land,
going south, presumably along
the Jordan River,
because where he ends up
is not so far from Jerusalem,
30 or so miles,
but on the other side of the river,
the east side,
in what we now know
as Jordan.

And then he begins
his final journey
up towards Jerusalem.
And on the way
he pulls his disciples aside
and tells them
that in Jerusalem
he will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes,
and will condemn him to death;
and handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified
and on the third day he would be raised.

And all that
seems to go without comment.
Except that the mother of James and John
comes to Jesus
and asks him if
in his kingdom,
her sons can sit
in the places of honor,
the places of power,
one to his left
and one to his right.

It seems that her sons
have forgotten to tell their mother
that Jesus isn't expecting
to have a kingdom,
not any time soon,
not the kind she is thinking of.
At least, that's what they say,
when the other disciples
get angry with them.
But Jesus intervenes

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Well, that's telling them.

And then they get going on their journey again, crossing the flat land west of the Jordan River,
calling through the town of Jericho
that sits right where the land begins to rise
toward Jerusalem.
And on their way out,
they hear shouting
and muttering,
and two voices emerge from the hubbub,
“Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”
And then the crowds
shouting back,
“Don't bother the rabbi!”
And Jesus stops,
and looks for the source of the trouble,
and sees two blind men.
“What do you want me to do for you?”
“Lord, let our eyes be opened.”
And he reaches out
and touches their eyes,

and they can see.

And he turns
and heads on up the road towards Jerusalem
his disciples
with him
and the two once-blind men
trailing behind.

Until finally they reach the last village
before the city,
Bethphage,
at the crest of the Mount of Olives,
and Jesus sends his disciples to find a donkey,
and he rides into the city,
surrounded by shouts and waving palms.

And the city is in chaos.
“Who is this?” people ask.
“Jesus,
from Nazareth,”
the palm waving crowds answer.

And then Jesus goes into the temple courtyard
and causes chaos,
tables and coins and sacrificial doves flying,
and reaching out and touching eyes,
and legs,
and hearts,
and children run round excitedly,
hunting for coins in corners and cracks,
telling everything
that they see.

And then it's back outside the city
for a quiet night with friends.
And in the morning
reaching for a snack from a fig tree
as they walked back to the city,
he found it bare and cursed it

and immediately it withered,
a strange story,
overkill you'd think
for a struggling tree
and a lesson about the power of prayer.

And then he's back in the temple,
and finally we've made it to today's reading.

The religious leaders
are still sore about his actions the previous day,
still trying to catch some of the escaped doves,
and searching the beggar children who hang round the temple
for lost coins,
and there is a pile of tables over in the corner
waiting to be repaired.

“Who gave you the right to do this?”
they ask.

“Who gave John the Baptist the right to baptize?”
he asks back.

And they know they're caught. Because no matter which way
they answer,
someone will be angry with them.

Either their leaders,
if they say John's right came from God,
because that would suggest
they should have followed him,
Or the crowds,
if they say it didn't come from God,
because the crowds believed John.
So don't say anything
at all.

And then Jesus
answers his question
for them.
He tells
this parable.

About father
and his two sons.
And the father went to each of his sons
and asked them
to work in his vineyard.

The first one
put his hands over his ears.
“Lalalalalalala.
I’m not hearing you!”
The second one said,
“Sure, Dad.”

Half an hour later
the first one looked out and saw his father
hard at work,
and felt guilty.
So he went out
and joined him.
The second one,
well, he had good intentions,
but had so much else to do.
He thought,
“I’ll just get a couple of things
crossed off my list,
and then I’ll go help.”
So he started on one thing,
then something else came up, and so on and so on,
and he looked out the window a couple of times
and saw his father - and his brother - hard at work -
but thought, just another minute,
until he heard the back door open
and realized it was his father and brother coming in,
and it was almost dark,
and the day’s work was done.

And, Jesus asks,
which one did the father’s will?
“The first one, I guess,”
they said.

“At least he showed up.”

“So,” Jesus said,
“John came to you
with a message from God, and you ignored it.
Even though you’re such sticklers for religious law.
You claim to be committed
to do what God wants,
but...
well, you just don’t get round to it.

Where as the people you look down on,
they missed the message
the first time round.
But when they heard it,
when they heard John,
they knew it was God speaking.
They listened.
And they acted.
And they will get to heaven
before you.”

Uh oh.
Not exactly what they want to hear.
And no answer to their question, either,
by what authority Jesus is doing this.

Except they know
that if in fact
it is God,
then they’ve messed up big time.
Because if it is God
they’ve missed the boat.
If it is God
they need to put their pious words into action.

And we have to face the same question.
If Jesus comes
with God’s authority
what are we

doing about it?
Are we listening?
Are we paying attention?
Are we willing to put aside
whatever we had planned
and do what God is calling us to do?

Because the reality is
that we're no different than the two sons.
Some of us
have heard God's call
and responded.
Yes, Lord, I'll follow you!
But somehow
things keep getting in the way.
We have family commitments
and so we don't always make it to worship.
We have an unexpected expense
and don't quite get round to giving
as much as we had planned.
We find ourselves too busy
to serve with gifts
that God has given us.

And others of us, if we're honest,
have our hands over our ears.
"Lalalalalalala"
We don't want to hear God.
We don't want God making demands on our lives.
Were just fine.

But here's still time,
there's always time.
Always time
to hear the call of God.
Always time to respond.
Always time
to act.

And the call of God comes in all sorts of ways.

Sometimes
it's when you realize you have particular gifts
that God can use.

And you offer them up.

Sometimes
it's when you feel a deep hunger and passion for something.

Sometimes,
it's simply when you see a gap,
and realize
that you could
fill it.

For me, the call to my new role in England
came out of looking at what was not happening in our diocese,
where things were falling through the cracks.

I went to our bishop and said,
"I think someone needs to be doing these things."

"There's no such job"

was his response.

And then I saw the same job
in another place.

And realized God was calling me,
even though it means
giving up my plans for the next few years,
and most of my belongings,
and a good part of my retirement benefit.

But when God calls,

God calls.

So where is God calling you?

Do you have your hands over your ears,

"Lalalalalala."

Have you said "Yes"

but haven't actually done anything about it?

Or are you ready and willing

to step out in faith

and go

where God calls you?