

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 28, 2014

"The Punch Line."

Matthew 21:23-32

The Pharisees were accustomed to people saying, "Yes, sir" to them. They were religious authorities. They were used to being treated as such. But there was a new teacher in town, a teacher who was threatening their authority. The Pharisees were alarmed. They feared Jesus' popularity, his ability to heal and to perform miracles. In their eyes, Jesus was preaching heresy and leading people away from the religious traditions that defined the Jews. The Pharisees wanted to expose him as a fraud.

It was in this context that Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard." The boy immediately said, "No." Later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to his other son and said the same thing. This one answered, "O.K." but he never got out to the vineyard. Then Jesus asked a simple question: "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Then Jesus delivered the punch line, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

That really was a punch line, and the Pharisees were the ones who were punched. I imagine Jesus heard some gasps and "How dare he!" from the crowd that day. It was unthinkable to compare the righteous Pharisees to blatant sinners like tax collectors and prostitutes. Didn't he know that the Pharisees were too good to be lumped together with the likes of them? Didn't he know that only those people with the right "credentials," so to speak, would make it into the Kingdom of God? What was Jesus talking about and why was he denouncing the best people in town?

There is an old Japanese legend that tells of a man who died and went to heaven. Heaven was beautiful full of lush gardens and glittering mansions. But then the man came to a room lined with shelves. On the shelves were stacked piles of human ears. A heavenly guide explained that these ears belonged to all the people on earth who listened each week to the word of God, but never acted to God's teachings. Their worship never resulted in action. When these people died, therefore, only their ears ended up in heaven.

Jesus is dealing with a bunch of "earless" religious folk in his passage, and it would be to our benefit to listen in on the conversation. It's so easy to mistake self-righteous attitudes for true belief in Jesus as our Savior. Any of us can be guilty of it. This passage packs a powerful message.

Imagine showing people a whole new view of God that breaks down the boundaries of everything they think to be true. Jesus is talking about what types of people are acceptable to stand before a holy, holy, holy God. And he passes over the religious professionals in favor of the worst of sinners. Has he lost his mind? Or could it be that our self-righteousness doesn't earn us many points with God? Maybe God isn't a scorekeeper tallying up our moral hits and misses. Maybe we don't have to earn God's love? Maybe God loves us even when we fail.

These sound like simplistic ideas, but those of us who cling to our self-righteousness, they are enough to shake us down to our very soul. God's arms are open to everyone, from every race and nation and tribe and tongue, from every walk of life, from every circumstance. We're really missing something extraordinary when we put boundaries on God's grace.

In the Pharisee's minds, God only had regard for that which was perfect, unblemished, without defect. They had reduced God to the level of human beings. The Pharisees had no concept of God's grace, God's love for all God's children, even those who were tarnished with sin. The Pharisees were badgering, pressuring, demeaning. They wanted perfection. Jesus knew that is not the way to bring hurting people into the kingdom of God. He did it with love and acceptance. He did it by living our God's amazing grace. We are to be grace-filled. We are to value all people as worthy of acceptance, and we are to introduce them to the One who died in their behalf, and in our behalf.

Quite a few years ago, millions of people have been inspired by Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of Christ*. Maxine Raines, director of a ministry to the homeless in Knoxville, Tenn. knew her homeless friends couldn't afford to buy a movie ticket. So she brought the movie theater to them. With the support of her church and private donors, Raines erected an outdoor theater under a downtown bridge where homeless people like to congregate. Then she showed the film to a group of more than 400 street people.

Many were moved to tears; dozens prayed to receive Christ that night. Raines commented, "I want them to be able to see that somebody cared enough for them to give his life for them..." They tell me they are hopeless, nobody can help and I say to them, "I know One who can"

Nobody is hopeless. Nobody is beyond help. Because there is a man with nails in his hands who says, "You're so important I gave my life for you." Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him"

Maxine Raines took the kingdom of God to a group of people who are usually overlooked, discounted, and left out. And many of them responded with repentance and faith. No one is left out of God's grace. The Pharisees wanted a kingdom that was reserved for themselves and their kind. Jesus wanted a kingdom that was big enough for everybody.

In 1962, James Meredith made civil rights history as the first Black student ever to enroll at the University of Mississippi. This simple act inspired vicious race riots in the surrounding town, but Meredith didn't let it intimidate him. Four years later, in a bid to inspire Black citizens in the South to vote, James Meredith planned a walk from Memphis, Tenn. to Jackson Miss. He carried nothing but a walking stick and a Bible. The 220-mile walk was an effort to show that a Black man could walk freely through the South. As Meredith commented, "I was at war against fear."

On the second day of his walk, however, James Meredith was ambushed by Aubrey James Norville, a Memphis hardware clerk. Norville shot him four times and left him to die in the middle of the road. Incredibly, Meredith survived the shooting.

And then a remarkable thing happened. As he recuperated in the hospital, dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of people gathered to continue his walk from Memphis to Jackson. On the last day, a recovered James Meredith accompanied by 12,000 marcher entered Mississippi's state capitol.

I believe that is what the kingdom of God will be like. One man was slain on a cross and that started a parade. At first only a few were brave enough to join it, but that few grew to hundreds, then thousands, then millions. Among these people are a few righteous souls. But these few righteous are outnumbered by the thousands, no, millions of persons, who have not been all they might have been, or should have been, but they've been healed by the wounds of the Master.

The kingdom of God has come that was the central message of Jesus' earthly ministry. The kingdom of God is marching forward, and nothing can stop it, nothing can prevail against it, not even the gates of hell. And you have a front-row invitation to be a part of it. This is the greatness of God's grace: Salvation cannot be earned, it is a free gift of love to all who will accept it. Don't let your goodness get in the way of Jesus' righteousness. Don't let your sanctity overshadow Jesus' sacrifice. Believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior and claim your place in the Kingdom of God today.