

Integrity in Community
Matthew 21:23-32
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
September 27, 2020
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I was on the phone with a friend the other day as she recounted tales of her son's weekend soccer tournament. His team, happily, made it into the championship game facing the only team in the tournament they had lost to in a previous game. In other words - the stakes were high. And, unfortunately, one of their best players had been red carded in their semi-final game meaning he was on the bench for the championship.

Or at least he was supposed to be.

Halftime came and they were down by 1. This is when the coach decided to take what one might call a "creative" approach. If they just had that good player in, he knew they would do fine. So, he had two players trade jerseys. Surely no one would notice if the banned young man was playing with a different number on his back, would they?

Needless to say, a lot of people noticed right away, the team got kicked out of the tournament, and the coach is facing disciplinary action. Meanwhile, an opportunity was created for my friend to have a conversation with her son which included the following sentence, "Integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching, even when you think you can get away with something else."

While there are various definitions for integrity, this is one that most resonates with me and seems to resonate with today's passage.

Today, among other things, we hear a parable of a father with two sons. The father instructed both to go and work in the vineyard, but the responses of the sons were quite different. The first said, "No." Maybe he had plans with friends, maybe he didn't really enjoy the work or maybe he had already committed to doing other work, maybe he was just feeling like he needed a day on the couch. We aren't told why, but his first reaction is refusal. However, after thinking about it, he changes his mind and he goes and does what the father had instructed to begin with.

Then there is the other son. Contrary to his brother's approach, he quickly agrees to whatever his father is asking. "Sure, Dad, I'll go work in the vineyard." And yet, his actions differ greatly from his words. It seems he just said what his father wanted to hear but didn't end up doing what was asked.

And it becomes clear that one son made the better choice. Because it wasn't what they said, but what they did when no one was watching that mattered. See, the first son is not criticized for saying no, but instead is praised for making the right choice with his actions.

And let us not miss that this parable comes in concert with a conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders about authority. Here we are, in the last week of Jesus' life, with the tensions high, and the leaders question Jesus about his authority. They are inevitably trying to get him into trouble. After all, if he claims the authority of God he can be accused of blasphemy. If he claims the authority of the empire, that, too will get him into trouble. And if he admits he has no authority, then the people will stop following him - which is just what the leaders are hoping.

Because this conversation comes on the tail of Jesus entering Jerusalem to a crowd waving branches and shouting, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matthew 21:9). This conversation comes on the tail of Jesus entering the temple and driving out those who were selling and buying as well as the money changers (Matthew 21:12-13). This conversation comes at a time when the stakes are high, when who people say they are becomes less important than who people prove to be.

And so, here, in today's reading, the people who are praised - it's not the religious leaders who think they have all the answers or the agreeable son who knows how to look the part. Rather the people who are praised are those who wear labels we try to avoid - the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the disagreeable child. These are the ones, not the only ones who will inherit the kingdom, but the ones who will be first in.

Because, friends, who we are, not on the surface, but down deep - it matters. Our faith is not about the labels we claim or the crosses we wear. Our faith is not about being able to name the date of our baptism or quote scripture. It is not about having perfect attendance at church or holding up the Bible in our defense.

Rather our faith, our calling, is about the way we live our lives. And, as Christians, that means that we are called to live in the ways of Jesus.

For too long Christianity has been used as a weapon against other people. For too many years people joined churches, not to deepen their relationship with God, but to further the success of their business ventures or in hopes of adding to the list of those who would vote them into office. For too long people have thrown scriptures around to pretend that God is on their side.

But if we look at the life of the one we claim to follow, we find none of that.

Rather we meet one who lived a humble life of simplicity and dependence upon others.

We meet one who was far more likely to listen than to talk.

We meet one who saw the belovedness in those others had pushed aside.

We meet one who was willing to name when the scriptures and traditions were being used, not to share God's love, but in order to hold people down or simply to further the agendas of the rich and powerful.

In Jesus we meet one who lived a life of integrity because he lived not for himself, but for the community, for those who were struggling, for the world...in Jesus we meet one who lived for others because he lived from the heart of God.

Living with integrity isn't about the degrees we have or the balance in our checkbook, it isn't about the labels we wear or the numbers who follow our Twitter feeds. Rather, living with integrity is about doing that which is right - not to further our own agendas - but that which is right and just for all people...living with integrity is about doing that which is right in the heart of God.

Friends, this is our calling. May it be and may it become the way of our living. Amen.