

Sermon on Matthew 21:23-32
17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 27, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends, grace and peace to you from our Lord, Jesus Christ.

I will make this short, though maybe not sweet, because we have a lot to do this day, as we celebrate the affirmation of baptism with Jack, our brother in Christ.

There are well-known sayings that go like this: *Actions speak louder than words. Watch what I do, not what I say. Don't listen only to what I say, but pay attention to what I do.* All of these sayings are relevant not only to the gospel today, but also to our lives of faith, this celebration of one young man's affirmation of faith, as well as what is going on today in the whirlwind of politics in America these days! Because I hear often to watch what a politician does, not what he or she says, because the words are a mirage, a distraction, meaningless without actions!

So in the gospel of Matthew, we see Jesus entering the Temple with his disciples - the center of Jerusalem's faith, just next door to the religious and political power of the Temple priests and King Herod's palace, and down the block from the real power in that city: the headquarters of Pontius Pilate and the Roman legion in charge of Jerusalem. They had marched through the main gate, just before Jesus had entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the day before. Jesus had caused a big fuss in the Temple that day, turning over the money-changers' tables and driving them out, saying "My father's house is a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves!" So many of the chief priests and the elders were very angry at Jesus - he was bad for business, and what priest likes tension and controversy in their holy place? At any rate, the next morning Jesus was teaching in the Temple, off to the side, when some of the priests walked over and demanded an answer: "*On whose authority do you DO THESE THINGS, here in this great Temple?*" Good question, because Jesus was not a priest, authorized to teach in the Temple, although he did, because he was a rabbi who knew a lot about God's Word, and people wanted to hear him preach! Plus, he could heal people! So it was a tense situation.

Jesus wouldn't answer unless they answered his question: "*On whose authority did John the Baptist baptize? His own, or from heaven?*" Well, that got them! If they said from God, the people would say why did Herod have him beheaded? If they said from himself alone, the people would protest, because they loved the Baptist. So they said "We don't know." So Jesus wouldn't answer them.

But instead, Jesus told a story, a parable, about a man with two sons. He asked them both to go out to work in his vineyard. One said yes, but he didn't go.

The other said no, he wouldn't, but he ended up going out to work. Which one did his father's work? It's obvious, the one who actually went out to work, not the one who said he would, but didn't. So, the truth of the matter is found in the saying, *Actions speak louder than words. Don't listen to what I say, watch what I do. My words are proven by the acts that I do - so you will know them by their fruits.*

Now, I know that Chris and DeAnne have two sons, Mike and Jack, but I don't mean to cast any doubt on either of them. I don't think Chris and DeAnne have a vineyard, and I don't know their family dynamics. So this parable and this sermon are not about them. The names are left anonymous because I don't wish to cast any dispersions upon anyone present today, characters real or fictitious! This is ancient scripture with a timeless truth, that still is good today.

The main point of this parable is how in this story there is a great reversal of our expectations, which is typically how Jesus describes the point of the gospel! One son says he will but he won't, and one son says he won't but he will! Can you relate? Have you ever done that? It's like the young person who says, during confirmation class, that he doesn't believe in all those myths they have been taught about God in Church, and can't wait to get out of here. The other one says they love everything about the church and they know all their Bible verses by memory. The one who loves it now, eventually disappears, distracted by life. Because they only "went along" to please their parents. The one who is the rebel, finds their life is empty and meaningless, fails at a few things, and rediscovers their true life through faith, and becomes a disciple of Jesus. Maybe even a pastor! Who knows - I was one of those! You guess which one it was?!!!

Today as we celebrate the affirmation of baptism with Jack, we can all relate to the question before us. Is our faith all words and no action, like political words might be, without proof? That's hypocrisy! Does it matter what we say we believe, if we don't act on our faith? What do you and I believe, and on WHOSE AUTHORITY? That of our parents? No. Of our faith leaders? Probably not. But words, tested by action, have authority and legitimacy, and that's what we seek, to be authentic IN FAITH AND IN LIFE.

So this isn't just a sermon for Jack, or his family, it is for all of us. Today we all celebrate our baptisms, and the promise of life given to us all. We promise to follow Jesus. Are they only words? We say "we believe"; that we follow Jesus. We believe in the promise that Jesus is in the bread and in the wine, his body and blood, given and shed for you. He proved his words when he died on a cross. What will you do with this promise tomorrow? I leave you all with this question that you alone can answer, in conversation with God. Bless you all with faith and the strength to live up to your words, and forgive us all when you and I fall short, as we always do, that we may rise up and walk again in faith, forgiven. For that is Jesus' promise; Amen.