

“Prove it.” (27Sept2020)

Matthew 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-13

Last week’s parable with laborers in the vineyard had those hired at the end of the day nevertheless paid for a full day. It presented a question of fairness, particularly in relation to our American economy and work ethic.

I’d like to observe that sometimes this has been called the Protestant work ethic. Without investigating the whole idea, I’ll just say that such a concept of work ethic wasn’t really Protestant as a whole, but Calvinist. So I say only partly jokingly that you can rest safely as a Lutheran in not needing a work ethic, since your assurance of God’s grace and blessing is entirely separate from what you have, what you do, what you prove. That’s some of where we’re headed today.

From last week’s question of whether it was fair giving the latecomers the same payment, we continually want to base it on earning, that you should be rewarded for what you do.

So we’re tempted to take today’s parable to ask: which son are you? Are you the one who shirks work and just tries to look good, or the one who gets the job done? With trite aphorisms, like “actions speak louder than words,” we reinforce our concept of the answer.

But if we want to make this about earning recognition, doing the right thing, we should step back from our own cultural presumptions. In Jesus’ time, the answer wasn’t nearly so clear. The first son publicly shames his father by opposing him, which was a worse offense in that culture than not accomplishing a task. That son doesn’t begin to repair the damage by secretly helping later on. In fact, there are versions of this story where the answer is given that the second son, who publicly preserves his father’s honor even though he privately fails, is better. (The GEMS and others reading *The Book of Longings* have vivid portrayals of the implications of such public shame in that culture.)

Given a lack of clarity on the answer generally and since it’s not very helpful to you particularly,

let’s set aside concepts of what you’re supposed to be working on and how to prove your faithfulness.

Let’s instead investigate that Jesus himself is being asked to prove it, to verify that he’s right, to demonstrate his validity. He’s backed into a corner in the temple, told that he needed to answer for his authority.

It’s worth noting the context for their challenging him. Though it feels for us like a very, very long time ago, this is the same chapter of Matthew as Palm Sunday. Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem on a donkey, gone promptly into the temple, drove out the money changers and released the doves, and then welcomed the blind and the lame and healed them, while also saying that the noisy children who were interrupting worship were actually offering praise.

For the chief priests and elders who wanted order and wanted things to run properly and wanted to be recognized for their own authority, this disruption from Jesus might well be questioned. He should prove why he thought he was allowed to do these things, why his actions were right.

Jesus is notoriously bad at answering questions, though, at responding directly to a challenge like this. We’d also frequently extrapolate that God is bad at answering demands, at giving in to requests for proof. “If you do love me, God, then please do such-and-so. If you do exist, show me a sign.” That just plain doesn’t seem to be how God in Jesus operates.

Which turns us to Philippians. This beautiful little passage, typically called the Christ Hymn, turns our theologizing and demands for proof on their heads. The Christ Hymn starts with an expectation that we know what it’s like to be God, to act like a God, to be in that place. It’s our version of authority and hierarchy, being at the top, being in charge, with power.

Except that Jesus didn’t hold that, and instead emptied himself, poured himself out, became humble and obedient. What he does looks like the opposite of an almighty God.

At that point, we really need to pause and pay attention to what the Christ Hymn is saying. Because humble obedience is mostly used to

reinforce hierarchy, to re-enshrine the powers, and to put God the Father at the very top of that heap. But the Christ Hymn exactly reverses and subverts that.

To whom is Jesus a slave? In whose presence is he humbled? For whom did he pour himself out?

Why, for you, of course! He poured himself out in love, took on all of humanity and even went into death, all because he loved you so much, because he was serving you. He did it for you! That is what it's like to be God: not to be in charge, but to give himself up completely. Not to be the one obeyed, but to serve in love. That's how we know God, because that's who Jesus is for you.

It means the clearest place to look for God, to look for power, to find authority, is in the one dying on the cross, giving his whole self for love, not for the world's type of victory.

A precursor of this is exactly what happened earlier in the chapter of Matthew on Palm Sunday, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. The phrase about a humble king subverts the entire notion of who kings are and what it means to rule. Kings aren't supposed to be subservient. Kings don't diminish themselves in the presence of others. Jesus upends the whole direction of roles in relationship.

In the temple, Jesus isn't going to prove his authority, because his authority paradoxically comes from giving up authority. His power is not in control but in serving. His dominion is love. As it says in an Advent/Palm Sunday hymn: "His is no earthly kingdom; it comes from heav'n above. His rule is peace and freedom and justice, truth, and love. So let your praise be sounding for kindness so abounding. Hosanna to the Lord, for he fulfills God's word!" (ELW 264)

That's why Jesus is really a challenge to Pontius Pilate and the Roman Empire, why siding with the ill and children and the poor is a threat to the economy of the high priests. If Jesus were just competing in the usual way, he'd lose. But because he turns the system on its head, they can't win at his game.

That makes some grateful: the powerless, those left out. They were declared losers by the old

hierarchy. They're not trying to cling to power; they didn't have any! That may be why Jesus says tax collectors and sex workers are going into the kingdom ahead of the priests and elders.

But we also notice he says going in "ahead of." Those who are used to being first will have to follow along. Not that they're excluded. That's may be my favorite result in the vision of the Christ Hymn, that all creation comes to acknowledge this way of God and agree with this regime of love, that this is the only way to play the game. They all take a knee, everyone in heaven and on earth and under the earth. That means living and dead. I take it to mean human knees of all statures, and cat knees and bees knees and spider knees and crane knees and fish knees (whatever those are). And your knees, original or replacements!

That leads to the rest of the Philippians passage, about what this means for how we relate to each other. We already said that the one Christ was obeying and was humbled to was not God the Father but you. But because we're so infected by this notion of having to measure up and trying to prove what's right and so subjected to hierarchy, it keeps finding its way back into the mix.

There are two bold capitalized highlighted words in the reading in the bulletin: ME and HIS. ("Just as you have always obeyed ME...to work for HIS good pleasure.") Neither of the words were put there by Paul. They were added in the English translation. We needed to make Paul the authority who should be obeyed, compelling us to do these things for God's good pleasure.

But without those words, it allows us to be community together. Our obedience is to each other, to those who need our love, to serving one another. And the good pleasure isn't because God wants you to do it and you have to try to keep God happy; it's because we find the joy in this way of life. We find it, along with all creation: this is how the universe is intended to be. Not in lording it over but in living for the sake of, pouring ourselves out, not in coerced humility, but in love.

One more word on being humble, then. This isn't to humiliate those who are already low. It's not telling the lowly to keep their place. It's not that

the tax collectors and sex workers should grovel even more before the alleged authorities. Rather, it's inviting the high not to keep thinking more highly of themselves than of others. It's inviting to love as Jesus loved, and never losing that you yourself are so honored and respected and cherished and adored that Jesus poured himself out in love for you. Once you know that, nothing can humiliate you, and you'll be ahead of a lot of people who think they're a lot better.