

Toward the Life of Integrity **Matthew 21:23-32**

Jesus bothered someone!

After last Sunday's worship, I had a conversation with Diane Newman-Goins about preparation for the church conference. Diane told me that we don't have major issues and she had not heard any concerns or complaints about the pastor. I was relieved and at the same time, I had to think if this is a really good thing. Perhaps you don't have major complaints about your pastor because you are good and loving people or your pastor is a good pastor. But it may be also true that you don't have complaints because I bother no one. My sermons and ministries haven't bothered or challenged you. If this is the case, that's not a good thing.

Jesus bothered people. He bothered many people especially those who had powers and privileges and those who worked for them. You remember what Jesus did at the temple. He "threw out everyone who had set up shop, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of loan sharks and the stalls of dove merchants. He bothered them and humiliated them by saying "My house was designated a house of prayer; You have made it a hangout for thieves." Yes. Jesus did the will of God and it bothered the religious leaders and their collaborators. Jesus challenged people who were taking advantage of the unjust temple system. He also bothered nice common people who simply accepted this unjust system as inevitable and complied with it. If we are never bothered by God or the teachings of Jesus Christ, it's not a good sign because it could mean that we don't take the teaching of Jesus Christ seriously.

Religious leaders challenges Jesus

Of course, people don't like to be bothered or challenged. Religious leaders at the temple were bothered by Jesus and didn't like it. So they challenged him. They asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus did the will of God which was caring for the poor and marginalized and proclaiming the good news. The religious leaders knew it, but they ignored it and questioned his authority because they feared that they might lose their power or the privileges they enjoyed. They knew God and the will of God, but they didn't do what they knew. That's a sign of losing their integrity of faith.

As they lost their integrity, truth no longer mattered to them. The only thing that mattered was the interest of their group. When Jesus asked, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?," they answered "we do not know." This conversation between Jesus and religious leaders looks familiar to us. Politicians often get asked easy questions that giving a straight answer to might not work in their favor. So, instead of telling the truth, they often say, "I don't know. I don't remember." Religious leaders used the same playbook. They lost their integrity.

"Disintegrating" means breaking up into small parts. When you know the right thing to do but for some reason, you cannot or do not do it, you may feel something fall apart in you. You don't have to be a politician to experience this feeling of breaking up. Imagine that you are on your way to shop for groceries, you stop your car at an intersection and a homeless man comes to you for help. As a good Christian, you would like to help him so you check your wallet and realize you only have a \$100 bill. What would you do? I would probably pass. How would you feel? Not excited and maybe kind of ashamed and guilty. Holding true to our core values is difficult because of the complexity of our lives. We often find ourselves juggling many responsibilities and commitments and we need to balance them. Helping others in need is

important but so is taking care of our family. Serving our neighbors is important but so is taking care of our church! On many occasions, we feel incongruence between what we say and what we do, a gap between knowing God and doing the will of God. That's our predicament.

A French author, said, "One must live the way one thinks or end up thinking the way one has lived." When we don't live out our faith, we gradually think that complete obedience to Jesus Christ and his teaching is impossible. Do you think that you can love your neighbor as yourselves? good! Then, can you love your enemy? If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, can you turn the other also? Can you leave everything behind and follow Jesus? Sounds impossible. We know Jesus' teaching is true but it sounds too idealistic and demanding for us to follow. So many Christians become Sunday morning Christians who act like Christians only on Sunday in church. This is a faith life without integrity but Jesus invites us to the life of integrity through the parable of two sons.

Toward the life of integrity

The parable is simple. "A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go." Then, Jesus asked the religious leaders, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They answered, "the first." The fundamental question is not simply whether you know God but whether you do the will of God. Doing the will of God is more important than knowing him. What is the will of God? What is the will of God? Loving God with all our being and neighbors as ourselves. Of course, this is easy to know but difficult to practice! But it's not impossible.

During the week, I participated in a Jubilee seminar in New York. The schedule was intense. It began at 8 a.m. and ended at 10 p.m. My body was tired but I was so intrigued by many wonderful stories of people striving to live out Christ's calling in their own life context. A pastor's wife shared the ministry of her church. The church runs a shelter and soup kitchen for runaway youth. It also provides free meals to kids and runs a café for kids and parents. They also offer special education for kids with ADHD. Can you guess how many church members they have? About 20 people. How can they do all these wonderful ministries? Two things made it possible. Calling and spirituality. She said that they do and can do all these ministries because first it's their calling from God. Ministry is not a work to endure but a way to realize God-given calling. Second, their ministries overflow from their spirituality, a deep communion with God. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they live out faith and bear fruit through their ministry. Think of the tree. To bear fruit, its roots need to be deeply grounded and connected with its source. Their ministry organically grows out of their spirituality. Their spirituality and ministry are integrated as one.

Don't you think we can do the same thing? Yes, we can. Don't worry. I am not intended to make all of you work tirelessly running a homeless shelter at this point. One pastor in the seminar shared wisdom for his ministry. He said that when a church considers a ministry for society, the church tends to think of what they want to do, like running a homeless shelter or community center. But his advice is that we should begin with what we can do. So, he first began by cleaning the streets of the town and gradually expanded his ministry to serving neighbors. One neighbor shared his concern that some people always left garbage in front of his house. He put up a warning sign but it was not effective. So his church members discussed it and came up with a creative solution. Can you guess what they did? They made a small garden in front of his house and people stopped leaving garbage there. Can we do the same thing? Yes, we can.

Find God's calling and do it in creative ways. Begin with something small and gradually but persistently grow. And God will do the least. That's a way toward a faith life with integrity, a life without a gap between knowing and doing. Christ will lead our way, so let us walk with Christ on this joyful journey. Amen.