

**The 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: October 1, 2017**

**Proper 21: Matthew 21: 23-32: *Self Righteousness and the Human Heart***

**Preached**

**By**

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**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

*When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”* The chief priests and elders of the Jewish people made up the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the religious leadership of the Jewish people. Along with the Pharisees, the chief priests and the elders were constantly attacking Jesus for his teachings, forgiving sins, breaking the Sabbath and consorting with sinners. Jesus denounced their external observances of the Jewish Law which they could not keep themselves and, most of all, Jesus denounced their self righteousness and hypocrisy. They were not used to being challenged by a carpenter from a lowly town. But, they were very afraid because there was a new teacher with a new teaching in

**town, a teacher who was threatening their authority and they were alarmed. They feared Jesus' popularity and his ability to heal and perform miracles. In their eyes, Jesus was preaching heresy and leading people away from the religious traditions that defined the Jews. The Jewish leadership wanted to expose him as a fraud.**

**It was in this context that Jesus tells a story about a man who had two sons.**

**He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today."**

**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 went to the vineyard. Then Jesus asked a simple**

**question: "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they**

**answered. Then Jesus delivers the punch line, *"Truly I tell you, the tax***

***collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.***

***For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him,***

***but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it,***

***you did not change your minds and believe him."***

**That really was a punch line, and the Jewish leadership were the ones who**

**were punched hard. I imagine Jesus heard some gasps and a, "How dare he!"**

**from the crowd that day. It was unthinkable to compare the righteous chief**

**priests, Pharisees and elders who fastidiously kept the Jewish Law to blatant**

**sinners like the tax-collectors and prostitutes. Didn't Jesus know that they were too good to be lumped in together with the likes of that riff-raff. Didn't Jesus 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 criticizing the best people in town? The answer is simple. Jesus knew their hearts were made of stone.**

**My sisters and brothers, here is the problem with a self-righteous attitude. It hardens the human heart. Self-righteousness takes our hearts of flesh and turns them into a heart of stone. Almost 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Ezekiel alludes to it today when he says, "...and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! The Prophet Ezekiel is giving the people of Israel, living in exile in Babylon, a message from God *"A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit, I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."***

**Today, Jesus shows us a whole new view of God that breaks down the boundary of everything we believe to be true. Jesus is talking about what types of people are acceptable to stand before a holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might and he passes over the religious professionals in favor of the worst of sinners. You might question yourself as well, has Jesus lost his mind? Or could it be that our self-righteousness doesn't earn us any points with**

**God? Maybe God isn't a Cosmic Scorekeeper, tallying up our sins. Maybe, just maybe, we don't have to earn God's love because maybe... God loves us just as we are even when we fail and fall. These sound like simplistic ideas, but to those of us who cling to our self-righteousness, they are enough to shake us down to our very soul. God's arms are wide open to everyone, from every race, creed, nation, tribe and tongue, from every walk of life, from every circumstance in life. We really miss something extraordinary when we put boundaries and limits on God's grace to people who are not just like us.**

**There was a beautiful toddler named Danae. People paid special attention to her, gave her candy, oohed and ahed over her, mainly because she was so darn cute. But when Danae was fifteen months old, she fell and injured her mouth. Suddenly, her mouth took on a lopsided shape that considerably altered her appearance. Overnight, the world seemed to treat Danae differently. Strangers no longer oohed and ahed over her. They stopped making a fuss over her. Admiring glances changed to awkward stares. Danae had not changed in the least. She was still a vivacious, smart, loving toddler. But the same folks who oohed and ahed no longer embraced and encouraged her because of her outward appearance.**

**In the minds of the Sanhedrin, God only had regard for that which was perfect, unblemished, without defect and ritually pure. They reduced God to**

**the level of human beings who turn their back on a little girl because of a crooked mouth. The chief priests and elders had no concept of God's grace and God's great love for all God's children, even those who were tarnished with sin. A hardened heart may want perfection, but the mind knows full well it is unattainable. Jesus knew that is not the way to bring hurting people into the Kingdom of God. Jesus brought people into a kingdom of the heart. Jesus acceptance of all God's people brought a beautiful diversity into this kingdom of the heart, this kingdom of conscience. Because Jesus possessed a heart of flesh, he did it with great love, mercy, compassion and most of all forgiveness for our sins. Jesus did it by living out God's amazing grace.**

**My brothers and sisters in Christ, this is how we are to live our lives.**

**We are to be grace-filled. We are to reach out to little girls with crooked smiles and old people with trembling hands. We are to value all of God's people as worthy of acceptance, and by our example as disciples of Jesus Christ we are to bring the down and out and the most vulnerable to Jesus who died for all of us. Jesus never excluded anyone.**

**When I go to Church Beyond the Walls in downtown Providence, I want the homeless, the alcoholics, the drug addicts, the mentally ill, the ex-convicts, the prostitutes, the limbless post traumatic syndrome disorder veterans to be able to see that Jesus cared enough for them to give His life for them. The homeless**

**in Burnside Park tell me they are hopeless and, nobody can help because no one really and truly gives a damn. I say to them, we care because we are here with you and we know One who can help because with this One nobody is hopeless. With this One nobody is beyond help. Why? Because there is a man with nails in his hands and feet who says, "You are so important that I gave my life for you."**

**My sisters and brothers, every weekend, Holy Trinity Church brings the Kingdom of God to a group of people who are usually overlooked, discounted, left out, marginalized and ostracized and many of them respond with repentance and faith. You see, no one is left out of God's grace. No one is excluded from the kingdom of god, not even a chief priest, not even your rector, not even you. You see the Jewish leadership knew they were forgiven, washed clean and ritually pure. Jesus simply widened the boundaries of the kingdom. Of course, the Sanhedrin was part of it, but so were the people that they would never accept as equals. The Sanhedrin 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, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. 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 marchers entered Mississippi's state capitol.**

**I believe that is what the kingdom of God will be like. The God/Man was slain on a cross and started the Jesus Movement. At first only a few were brave enough to join it, but that few grew to hundreds, then thousands, then millions, then 10s of million and finally billions of people. Among all these people there may be a few righteous souls. But these few righteous people are far out- numbered by the billions of people, who have not been all they might have been, or should have been, but they have been healed by the wounds of**

**their God and savior, Jesus the Christ.**

**Here is the challenge for this week. The kingdom of God has come. That was the central message of Jesus' earthly ministry. This kingdom of the heart, this kingdom of conscience, this Jesus movement has been marching forward relentlessly for over 2,000 years, and nothing can stop its forward momentum, nothing can prevail against it, not even the gates of Hell. And you Holy Trinity Church, you have a front-row invitation to be a part in it. This is the greatness of God's grace: salvation cannot be earned; it is a free gift of love offered to all who will accept it. So, don't let your self-righteousness get in the way of Jesus' righteousness. Don't let your hearts turn to stone. Don't let your sanctity overshadow Jesus' sacrifice. In all things, let God make your heart a heart of flesh so you can be open to receive and give the many blessing of God's many graces. AMEN.**