

## Doing the Right Thing (Matt 21:23-32)

Characteristic of good leadership, according to *Leadership for Dummies* (which, I think we can all agree, is about my speed), is a commitment to leading by example. That seems like a pretty safe thing to say.

Leaders have to know how to tell people what to do, but the really good ones know that showing people you're willing to do it yourself is even **more** important.

I mean, how willing are we to follow a leader who sits sipping lemonade on the veranda, preparing for a late morning tee time, telling everyone else what to do—and then criticizes them when they don't do it quite right? All while everybody else is breaking their backs trying to get the **job** done? That's just poor leadership.

So, when folks know how to talk the talk, but can't be bothered to walk the walk, we call them what?

Phonies? Pretenders? Hypocrites?

There aren't too many things we like less than ***all-talk-and-no-show***. Admittedly, not all phonies pay a price for their hypocrisy—some get to stay in the U.S. Congress.

Look, I'm in the telling business. I tell people stuff for a living. Here's how you're supposed to live. Here's what you're supposed to do. Here's the kind of person you should want to be.

I've been to school to learn how to tell people stuff. I've even been told on occasion, "Hey, you're pretty good at telling people stuff." And I do that kind of "aw shucks" thing. But I know that after all these years I'm not half bad at

telling people how they're supposed to live. In fact, I have a vocational interest in letting people think there's a big secret that only the initiated have the answer to.

It's not true that I know "all the stuff," and I presume to dole it out a little bit each week. But there are a lot of people out there who think something like that.

And maybe there are times when it's true that I know **some** stuff. Things are complicated, and a little knowledge sometimes helps tease out a way forward.

Most of the time, though, it's not a whole lot more complicated than: Show up. Be honest. Try hard. You know what I'm saying?

But sometimes it strikes me that I'm not only in the **telling** business. I'm also in the **showing** business. And that's when

I start worrying, because it's not always easy to know **what** to do, or **how** to do it.

And I'll be honest with you. The **showing** business is a lot more difficult than the **telling** business. Any preacher worth their salt knows it's true. Of necessity, you **have** to preach better than you are. If I had to wait to master something before I could preach on it, it'd be a pretty short service every Sunday.

Even so, it's difficult to admit that sometimes your words are the best thing about you... that your ability to put them into action always seems to lag behind.

Jesus, of course, knew that. In today's Gospel, Jesus takes on that very issue.

This passage from Matthew doesn't do us many favors. It starts in the middle of the scene. "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?'"

What are they talking about? I mean, why are they sniping at Jesus right off the bat? He's not even done getting his caramel macchiato in the new

**coffee-bar-and-gift-shop-in-the-narthex** when the bigwigs start hectoring him.

"Where'd **you** get the authority to do these things, and who **gave** it to you?"

Now, as a diligent reader, your first question is probably, "Authority to do **what**, exactly?"

Well, here's where a little detective work pays off. If you go back to the **beginning** of chapter 21, you'll see just where we are in the larger story of Jesus. As the chapter opens up,

we're thrust right into the middle of Palm Sunday. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem—the seat of political power in Palestine.

Remember that? Jesus comes parading into town in what looks like—from a distance—a military procession—being hailed as the heir of King David, the long-awaited Messiah who'd throw off Roman oppression.

That he's on a donkey, however, turns the whole military-messiah trope upside down. Riding a baby donkey is no way to lead the troops into battle, after all... at least battle as we traditionally think about it. Something strange is going on.

What happens next?

Jesus heads right to the temple—the **seat** of religious authority—where he stokes the revolutionary fires even

hotter by turning over the money tables—which, of course, does nothing to make the local religious brahmins want to dig fishing worms with Jesus anytime soon.

Again, Jesus drops an econo-size hint about the kind of strange messiah he's going to be. But how?

He immediately alienates the very religious power-brokers who could help grease the right skids once the time for revolution comes.

But there's this little throw-away line in verse 14—a line that appears pretty innocuous at first glance—that offers up the key to our text for today.

After calling out the religious stewards of the temple, God's house on earth, and saying that they've made God's house into a den of bandits, we get this: "The blind and the lame came to him *in* the temple and he cured them."

Jesus throws out the religious folks, and lets in the people who need God ***most***.

And you say, “Um, yeah. Okay. Keep going.”

That’s it. That’s the key to our text for this morning.

“That doesn’t sound like much.”

All right. Let me see if I can be a bit clearer. The temple —a house of prayer, the place on earth where God was said to live —has been turned by people in the “telling business” into something it was never meant to be: a place where the folks who’ve needed God most have been prevented from going.

In other words, the people who are supposed to be on the front lines in pursuing God’s justice, who’ve made a living

telling everybody **else** how to live... by denying justice...

have failed to **show** people how to live.

So, when they come to Jesus in our text today, asking him by what and whose authority he's kicking people out of **their** temple, they think they still hold the moral high ground.

**They're** the ones who're supposed to be in charge, after all.

I mean, Caesar's governor in Judea **appointed** them. Just who does this guy think he is, waltzing into their place and busting up the good china? Then calling the powerbrokers bandits who steal from the poor and give to the rich?

And if that's not enough, he's letting **those** people in. You know, the riffraff—the ones who've been so assiduously excluded to this point. The people that all the insiders agree **deserve** to be denied access. Yeah, them.

Jesus turns the whole thing back on the religious leaders by asking them a question about John the Baptist—a question that holds no good answer for them: “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

Immediately, they see they’ve been had. “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.”

So they gave Jesus the only answer they **could** give, a huge verbal shrug: “We don’t know.”

And Jesus says, “Doggone right, you don’t know! Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

Then he launches into this weird parable about two sons. The father goes to the first son and tells him to go work in the vineyard. And the first son says, “No. I don’t think so. I

don't feel like doing that." Later, though, he changes his mind and goes out to do his chores.

The father then goes to the second son and tells him to go work in the vineyard. And the second son is much more accommodating, saying, "Sure thing, pop. I'll go." But he doesn't do what he said he would.

Jesus turns to the chief priests and the elders and asks, "Which of the two did the will of his father?"

They don't hesitate. "Of course, the **first** son."

Jesus says, "The tax collectors and the sex workers are going to enter the kingdom of God ahead of you."

Interesting that Jesus once again lets in the people the temple grand **poobahs** have constructed so many institutional barriers to keep out: the blind, the lame, the tax

collectors, the sex workers. Jesus restores **access** to God, and in the process restores **justice**.

But the problem is that Jesus shouldn't have to **restore** justice. Justice should already be present. God's left people in charge, stewards whose responsibility it is to see that justice gets done. The religious leaders aren't just supposed to **talk** about justice; they're supposed to live it. And they've failed miserably.

That's the key. They've **talked** about justice. They've **said** all the right words. But sometimes words aren't enough. The most powerful sermon the chief priest and the elders preach is the one that indicts their inaction. God says, "Go to the vineyard. I'm putting you in charge of caring for it, tending to it."

And they say, "Of course. We'll go. You can count on us."

But they don't **go**, do they? They don't care about the vineyard, except insofar as it allows them to enrich themselves by exercising power at the gate to the vineyard. They're good at telling **other** people what's supposed to **happen** in the vineyard, but when it comes time to pull weeds and dress the vines, they're out on the golf course, worried only about looking after themselves and their own interests.

Instead of giving their full attention to their **real** job—making certain that the system over which they hold power is accessible to the very people who **need** it—these fat cats casually make decisions about justice and how much value other people's lives **have**.

This passage is scary for people like me, people with privilege and power, people who've been given the task of showing, not just telling, about the reign of God.

Because, you see, the reign of God does not exist where some are not welcome... where the lame and the blind, where the tax collectors and the sex workers, where the hungry and the poor stand on the outside looking in—ignored.

The reign of God does not exist where people are barred entrance because of sexual orientation or gender identity, because of race or immigration status. There doesn't have to be a sign on the door that says, "You're not welcome here."

The reign of God does not exist where immigrants cower in fear that they'll be shoved into a dark van and sent to a facility without anyone knowing where they've gone, where people without power and status are ignored... until somebody starts raising a fuss, gathering on the streets to protest the abuse of power.

The reign of God does not exist where Black people have to cry out against the state-sanctioned violence against them... sometimes, even in their own homes... where they have to live with a justice system designed to punish them disproportionately, where Black families have to walk out into a world every day that has shown repeatedly that they're neither valued nor welcome, and therefore, not safe.

The reign of God does not exist where people huddle in the oppressive night, wondering where they will find food and water for their children, medical care for their seniors, while the people who are supposed to be looking out for them are too busy whiling away an early autumn day at the country club.

People'll know they're welcomed by God—not just because we **tell** them (as important as that is)—but because we **show** them... we keep throwing open the doors and inviting everyone to come in and sit at this table.

We keep working on behalf of those who've been turned away by the very power-brokers who're supposed to be tending the vineyard—but who've proven themselves inadequate to the task by their continued failure to actually pull the weeds and dress the vines.

Sometimes words aren't enough, largely because they have to bear at least a passing resemblance to the lives we live.

Show up. Be honest. Try hard. You and I, we may never get it **all** right... but we can never forsake working in the vineyard just because it's easier to **talk** about it.

Because **doing** the right thing, walking the walk, is the most powerful sermon any of us will ever preach.

—Amen.