

Lectionary 26 A
Faith that Is Seen and Heard

October 1, 2023
Matthew 21:23-32

Our lessons today are about the way we live our lives. We are responsible for what we say and do. We are to have the mind of Christ. We are to act under the authority of God. Our words and our actions reveal our faith – and actions speak louder than words. Here is a story I read some years that is a bad illustration of faith. I don't know if it's true or not; but it could have happen.

An honest man was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him.

He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating woman hit the roof, and the horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection, dropping her cell phone and makeup.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer.

The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up.

He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door.

She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him.

"I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally ... I assumed you had stolen the car."

Her words and actions were a poor witness to her faith. We are to do better. We can also say that her words and actions didn't measure up to the way the police officer thought Christians should live. The world might expect us to be morally perfect; or, at least, kind and loving – and we will fail. Christians should be quick to admit when we have failed; rather than try and cover it up or rationalize it. Too often, people of the world have viewed Christians as judgmental and condemning, rather than kind and loving.

The entire gospel of Matthew has an emphasis on faith that is seen and heard. Repeatedly, he indicates that we are known by our fruits. The good tree naturally produces good fruit. Fruit can be seen. Fruit benefits others. We eat them. We can plant them to grow new trees.

The Gospel parable, as it was read, indicates that it is not *saying* "yes" to the father that is as important as *doing* the work the father asked his child to do. Everyone could see that the

son did what his father asked him to do – even if, at first, he said he wouldn't. What he *did* was most important.

However, there are some ancient manuscripts where the answer to the question: "Which one of these two did his father's will?" is, "The second one." There are cultures today where saying, "no," to one's father in a public setting is a worse offense than not doing what the father asked. In those cultures, there is almost no greater sin than to shame one's father in public. "What kind of father would raise a son who would *speak* that way to him?" What we *say* is also important.

Both sons were wrong and needed to change.

Our translation says that the first son "changed in mind." Later it says that the religious leaders didn't "change their minds."

A change in mind may not be seen, since it happens in the head. We often don't want people to know what's going on in our head.

"Change in mind" is not the most literal understanding of this Greek word. It refers to "a change in what one cares about" or "a change in what one is most concerned about." It's a change in one's heart. It's a change in one's life. It is a change that can be seen. It is much more than just what goes on in the head.

The faith of John the Baptist was heard in what he proclaimed. It was also seen as he lived "the way of righteousness," as our text says. Seeing his life as well as hearing his words should have led the religious leaders to change their hearts and lives. It didn't. Their hearts were hard. Their minds were made up. They weren't about to change.

They should have seen the change in the lives of the tax collectors and prostitutes. Their hearts and lives were changed when they believed John's message. Their new faith was something that could be seen. It should have convinced the religious leaders of the truth of John's words. It didn't. Their hearts were hard. Their minds were made up. They weren't about to change.

What should change? Our priorities. How we prioritize our time and our money are changes that might be seen. How we talk about something indicates what we care about.

I had a friend who used to talk about how important her family was to her; but her use of time said something different. A counselor helped her realize that every time she said "yes" to serve on church committees or other commitments that she enjoyed doing – and did well, she was saying "no" to her family. She cared about both.

You are spending time to hear God's Word. You are spending time to obey Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of me." Your actions indicate that you care about Jesus Christ, his Word, and this community of believers. These are acts of faith that can be seen. How you spend your time indicates what you care about.

Besides your use of time, how we use our money indicates what we care about. Contributing to churches and other charitable agencies indicate that we care about them. In a couple weeks will be asked to make a financial pledge to the ministries of Christ Lutheran Church. We are also planning to have a presentation from Lutherwood – our camp that we visited last Friday. They will be asking for your support for their ministries. How you use your money is a witness to what you care about.

A speaker on evangelism mentioned that when he visited a family, he learned not to ask about the pictures on the mantel, because grandma would spend an hour talking about her

grandchildren. That's who she cared about. It took little effort for her to talk about them. Sometimes people get that excited when talking about their church or their faith in God.

The words we use indicate something about our beliefs.

Our faith is seen by the ways we use our time and money. It can be heard by the words we speak. Faith is more than what happens inside; it also results behaviors that others can see and words they hear from our mouths. I believe that the question, "What do you believe?" is not nearly as important as the question, "What difference does it make in your life that you believe?"

By seeing and hearing what we care about, others may change their own cares and come to believe in the same Jesus who has had such an effect on our own lives.

We can't do this ourselves. Paul indicates in our Second Reading that God gives us the power to will and to do his good pleasure. God's presence in our lives will perhaps make us be more patient and courteous with others when we're driving on the road – including the road of life. What others hear us say and see us do is our witness to Jesus. It is the fruit that grows out of our trust in Jesus.