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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Change”

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Matthew 21:23–32

23When he 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?” 24Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 26But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” 27So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

28“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32For 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.

“Change” Matthew 21:23-32

If you're a regular listener of TED talks, then you've probably heard the talk given by Zak Ebrahim titled "I am the son of a terrorist. Here's how I chose peace." Zak's father was part of the group of Muslim extremists who planned and carried out the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. His part of the planning was conducted from prison, where he was sent after he assassinated the leader of the Jewish Defense League, a rabbi. Eventually, Zak's father was convicted for his involvement in the World Trade Center plot and spent much of Zak's childhood in jail.

Zak's father brought up his son to believe the way he believed — that they must use any means necessary, including violence, to make others live according to their interpretation of Islam. By the time Zak was 19 he had moved 20 times and, as the new kid at school, he was an easy target for bullies. Zak could have easily judged the people around him based on arbitrary categories like race or religion, and followed in the footsteps of his father.

Instead, as he got older he began to question what his father had taught him. Were the extremist views his father clung to really what God wanted? Were they really what Zak wanted for himself?

In the end, Zak decided that the answer to this question was no. His beliefs changed, as most beliefs do, because of his experiences. He made a friend and only after developing this friendship did he discover that his new friend was Jewish...and only then did he realize that there was no inherent animosity between them because of their different religions. He worked for a summer at an amusement park and encountered people from all walks of life, all faiths and cultures, and discovered that in many ways they there were just the same as him. He also spent a lot of time watching "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," which, if you don't know it, is a wickedly clever and unfailingly funny send up of the daily news. Zak calls the host, Jon Stewart, a kind of father figure, who forced him to be intellectually honest with himself about his own bigotry and helped him realize that a person's race, religion, or sexual orientation had nothing to do with the quality of one's character.

Zak now dedicates his life to speaking out against terrorism and extremism, spreading a message of peace and nonviolence. His life has become a force for good, all because he changed his mind and decided that he did not have to believe the same things or live out those beliefs in the same violent ways as his father.¹

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks/zak_ebrahim_i_am_the_son_of_a_terrorist_here_s_how_i_chose_peace/transcript?language=en

In today's passage, Jesus has an encounter with religious leaders who are convinced that their understanding of their religion and their way of life, is *right*. There are many reasons they believe this, but mostly it's because they believe they are doing what God wants them to do, what God has commanded them to do. It also happens that in this set-up they are the ones who have power and authority. Which makes them particularly resistant to change.

It also makes them resistant to Jesus. Because what they keep seeing Jesus do doesn't fit with their understanding of what God wants. Jesus is reinterpreting laws and extending God's love to everyone, including those who, according to the religious laws and customs of the day, have placed themselves beyond the boundaries of God's care.

Jesus' actions threaten everything the religious leaders understand about who God is and who they are. And so, when they encounter him in the temple, they challenge the only thing they can: his authority. If they can prove that he has no authority to speak or act or reinterpret, then they can undermine everything he has said and done. They can prove they are right and they can make sure things stay just the way they are

Lillian Daniel once served as the pastor of a historic New England church. Her great legacy at the church was that she oversaw the restoration of a small chapel. Her predecessor had made the space into an all-purpose room, ripping out old pews and creating a space where local 12-step groups could gather. He had furnished the room with blue, vinyl-covered chairs that Lillian thought were hideous.

So during her tenure at the church, she began researching what the chapel had looked like before, and eventually she restored it to what she thought were its former glory days. She even found a carpenter who recreated the old wooden pews. It was a beautiful, sacred space for intimate weddings and funerals and she was very proud to have restored it.

Then Lillian took a call to a new church. Years later, she heard that her predecessor had undertaken a major capital campaign that had allowed him to renovate the entire church. The thing he was most proud of? Turning that lovely little chapel into an all-purpose room where the children could gather for education and worship.

After hearing that, Lillian had a dream one night that her successor was giving her a tour of her old church after the restoration. When they got to the chapel he opened the door and said casually, "This space was quite unusable. We needed more space for children's worship and education, but gosh did we have a devil of a time pulling

out the old pews! Today, we call it our all-purpose room, and the best part is we discovered these blue vinyl chairs in the basement that work perfectly in here!”

Then, in her dream, Lillian saw herself and these other two pastors of the church, the one before her and the one after her, standing before the judgment throne of Jesus waiting to find out who was right about the chapel. She knows it’s two votes for the all-purpose room and only her vote for the worship space. But she also knows that Jesus’ vote is the only one that counts.

To her predecessor, Jesus says, “You were right to care about the recovery of addicts and to open that space up for those life-saving meetings.”

To Lillian, Jesus says, “You were right to care about beauty and worship...”

And to her successor, Jesus says, “You were right to follow the movement of the Spirit and allow the children a space to gather.”

Then Jesus says, “But as for those blue vinyl chairs...who cares! Get over yourselves. You are here for eternity, people.

“So here are the keys to your eternal homes, all next door to one another on clergy row. You can all move in and put big signs in your clergy yards that say, ‘Jesus says I was right.’”

(Can you imagine that? Spending eternity with a big sign in your yard that says “Jesus says I was right!”?)

In the dream, Lillian says to Jesus, “You mean to tell me that heaven is a place where all the clergy of the same church live next door to one another in the same clergy subdivision with self-righteous signs in their yards?”

There’s a long pause.

And Jesus says, “Oh wait Lillian, this is really awkward. You thought this was *heaven?*”²

Today’s passage is about anyone who is invested in the status quo because they think it is right, because they think they are right. Which means that, like it or not, today’s passage is about us.

One thing I always worry about with passages like this one is that when we can come across as anti-Jewish when we talk about the religious leaders in conflict with Jesus. But their response to Jesus has nothing to do with their being Jewish, it has everything to do with their being human and holding positions of privilege and

² Lillian Daniel, *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Isn’t Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church*, 2013.

power in their culture. This story isn't about them - whoever they might be - it's about us. It's about how our commitment to the status quo causes us to miss what God is doing here and now.

We are all susceptible to the belief that the way we see the world is the way the world really is. But when we confuse our beliefs with reality, we become invested in that reality, in the status quo. When we think that the way we view the world is the *only* way the world should be viewed, we then feel we must defend that view at all costs. The more determined we are to secure our view of what is right, the more we resist change because it threatens our understanding of who we are and how the world works.

This is why we tend to gravitate toward friends who believe the same things we do about religion or politics; it's why the media we consume — whether it's NPR or Fox News or the Daily Show with Jon Stewart — is media that supports our views; it's why we worship where we worship.

But, as Anne Lamott once said, "You can safely assume you have made God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

When we are sure that we are right, we cannot be open to God doing something surprising and new, and we will find it very hard to change.

During last Sunday evening's vespers service, those in attendance were invited to take a stone and place it into a bowl of water as a symbolic act of releasing their burdens, fears, pain, or struggles.

As I thought about change this week, I kept returning to the symbolism of this ritual. At first it seemed obvious that water represents the washing away of our fears and struggles. But then I began to think about what rocks represent: weight, solidity, permanence. Rocks are not easily changed, and, of course, neither are our struggles...or our most deeply held beliefs about ourselves, about others, about God.

But one thing that can change rocks over time is water. When water runs over rocks, whether in a stream or on the shore, it slowly but surely has an effect on them.

It changes them.

In the parable before us today, the son who did the will of that father was the son who changed his mind, who in time was willing to do the thing that at first he refused to do. Who knows why his initial response to his father's request was resistance — maybe he was afraid that he couldn't do it well, maybe he resented being asked, maybe he figured his brother would take care of it. But the more he thought about it, the more he allowed his father's request to sink in, the more he

realized that it was never too late to change his mind and try to do what his father had asked.

Father Greg Boyle, who works with gang members in Los Angeles, clearly remembers the day Mike Wallace and the *60 minutes* film crew came to do an interview about Boyle's work Boyle writes: "For all his initial insensitivity, toward the end of the visit Wallace did say to me, 'Can I ask you something? I came here expecting monsters. But that's not what I've found.'

Later as we sat in a classroom filled with gang members, Wallace pointed at me and said, 'You won't turn these guys in to the police.' Which seemed quite silly to me at the time. I said something lame like, 'I didn't take my vows to the LAPD.'

But then Wallace turned to a homie and grilled him on this, saying over and over, 'He won't turn you in, will he?' And then he asks, 'Why is that? Why do you think he won't turn you over to the police?'

The kid just stared at Mike Wallace, shrugged, not fully grasping the baseline of his question, and said, "God...I guess."³

When John the Baptist was out in the wilderness calling people to change their lives, to be baptized with water, he was calling them to let God change their hearts.

When Jesus gave hope to those who had given up hope and hung out with people who had long resigned themselves to living outside the mainstream, he showed both the marginalized and those in power that God can change our hearts.

And 2,000 years later when we hear this story about how Jesus confronted the status quo, we are reminded yet again that God is in the business of doing something new. God changes hearts. God changes us.

Change is never easy. It rarely happens all at once. To change our minds about our deeply held beliefs or values is uncomfortable. Like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, we will resist it, we will question it, we will try to figure out some way to get around it.

But the stories Jesus tells and the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection remind us that God is always nudging us, encouraging us, and compelling us to be open to change. God is at work in the world and has invited us to join in building a new heaven and a new earth where peace, justice, and mercy will come and change everything...even us. Amen.

³ This story comes from Gregory Boyle's book *Tattoos on the Heart*. It was quoted in Kristy Farber's sermon "\$13.98 plus free shipping" on August 31, 2014 at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, NC.



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