

## EASIER SAID THAN DONE (or *vice versa*?)

Psalm 78:1-16, 79:8, 13, OT p. 537  
Matthew 21:23-32, NT p. 23

September 25, 2011  
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Marilyn Allen

In the Gospel readings from Christmas to Easter, we hear the main events in the life of Jesus. From Easter to Advent, the assigned readings focus on the teachings of Jesus, and our response to what he has said and done. So today, we skip over one of the main events in his life – the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his demonstration in the temple, where he tipped over the moneychangers' tables and drove out the people selling animals for sacrifices. We heard that story before Easter. But now we come to what Jesus did and taught in Jerusalem. The chief priests in the temple want to know who gave him the right to hold a demonstration in the temple and then to teach on the temple grounds.

Matthew 21:23-32

“You did not believe him.” The religious leaders knew that Jesus would accuse them of not believing the message of John the Baptist, and he did. Do you know what that message was? It's not in today's reading. You have to go back to chapter 3 of Matthew's gospel to find it. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Repent means to turn around, change your mind. And there, at the end of the conversation between Jesus and the chief priests, Jesus says, “even after you saw it (that other people believed John), you did not change your minds and believe him.”

“Change your mind” is one of the meanings of “repent.” To repent does not necessarily require feeling guilty for sin, though that might be part of it. To repent can mean to see a new way and change your life's direction to go that way. It can mean to understand more fully what faithful living looks like, and be willing to live authentically what you say you believe.

One of the sons in the parable changed his mind. Though he had, rather rudely, I think, told his father he wouldn't work in the vineyard, he decided to do it. The other one didn't do what he had politely said he would, though that's not necessarily a real change of mind – I wonder if he intended to do it at all, but agreed just to keep his dad off his back.

Was that second son anything like the religious leaders? Say what you have to, to keep your place in the temple hierarchy. Say what you have to, to keep peace with the Romans. Or teach the foundations and details of the Jewish faith, but fail to live within the spirit of the law. It's easier to talk than go out to work. Easier said than done.

There are times, though, when something is more easily done than said. You've had family members, I'm sure, who were able to show their love but just couldn't quite say the words. If that's an important person in your life, you long to hear them say, “I

love you. I appreciate you.” Sometimes we’re that way about our faith and how God is helping us now – we find it hard to say the words.

The Presbyterian planning calendar says this is Evangelism Sunday. The Music and Worship Committee had some discussion about this a couple of weeks ago. Then I asked the session to talk about evangelism, and also brought it up at the local pastors’ study group. These discussions confirmed what I already knew. We don’t want to knock on doors. We don’t want to talk to people we don’t know. We don’t want to jeopardize our friendships or our workplace relationships. And we certainly don’t want people to think we’re fanatics. I can’t help but agree. We do think we can show God’s love through what we do and how we choose to live. And I agree with that as well.

I wonder, though. Is love in action enough? Or do we need at least a few words? But are words enough, if they are not in the context of a relationship? One of our elders suggested that evangelism is the invitation to walk side by side, as we discover together what it means to follow Christ. An invitation usually includes words. I’ve told you before about the woman who does my sister’s hair. When my sister was going through a really rough time, this woman said simply, “I don’t how I’d have made it through the last couple of years without my Bible study group.” My sister had already been thinking about going back to church, and that was all it took to end her 38 years of “wandering in the wilderness.”

Evangelism doesn’t need to be high pressure, and probably shouldn’t be. It is simply speaking a few words about what is happening in our lives because of God’s faithfulness. Who knows? That might be exactly what that person needs to hear.

So, what qualifies as the Good News? I’ve adapted a list from a Presbyterian resource. The Good News of Christ is certainly for those suffering from guilt and regret about their own past actions that cannot be fixed, for those suffering shame and confusion because of the actions of others, for those who are controlled by addiction and abuse. God offers forgiveness, freedom and new life through the power of Christ, and loving acceptance in the company of God’s people.

For those enduring physical suffering or mental anguish, and for those facing death, the Good News tells of the One who endured the depths of human pain, who goes with us through our dark valley, and who, through brothers and sisters in faith, is deeply involved in our times of suffering and healing.

For those who feel deserted or left alone in life, the homeless and the orphaned, the Good News is of a divine Friend who never leaves or forsakes us, who comforts us with the Holy Spirit and befriends us in God’s family.

For those who struggle against injustice or war or oppression, the Good News is that God in Christ is an advocate for justice and peace, and has called the community of faith into partnership for the transformation of our world. We met such an advocate for environmental issues on Friday evening. John Pitney had suggestions of ways we can

work together to honor and protect God's good creation. For following Jesus brings wholeness in life, simplicity brings freedom, and life lived in harmony with God's will brings meaning and purpose.

For all of us, the Good News is the assurance of God's love, which we know in Jesus Christ and in the company of God's people. In whatever way we have found God's acceptance, strength and peace, we can speak about that when the time seems right. Many of you listed similar gifts last week, when we were celebrating Plymouth Church's birthday and what this congregation has meant to us. We can say simple things like that in other settings as well.

The Psalm that Bill read encouraged the people to remember what God had done in the past, to tell the story to the next generations, and to give thanks. One of the most important things we can do is to tell the next generation, especially if we have some younger folks in our families. It's not easy, and you can't tell if the words are sinking in. And faith almost always looks different in the next generation. It seems to me that everyone under the age of 30 lives in another world, and I'm beginning to catch a glimpse of how little I know about their world. Many other people we encounter come from backgrounds we can't imagine. Whatever our age or background, we are all looking for welcome and acceptance, and the assurance that God welcomes and accepts us. That's why in the visitors packet, we have this welcome:

If you are looking for a fresh connection with God, I hope you will sense God's presence in a new way as we worship together. If you have spiritual questions, we are here to help you live with the questions as the Spirit leads you to new understandings – and perhaps some answers. We don't claim to have all the answers, but we believe the questions are important in our growing relationship with Jesus Christ. If you are looking for a place where you can feel at home, with new friends and a sense of Christian family, we hope you will find that among us, as we get better acquainted over snacks after worship, exchange ideas in study and social groups, and work together in service to our community. We are here to encourage one another in faith and service. We welcome you to this part of God's family.

We know that we're low-key evangelists, but we can share in word and deed what God has done for us. We can welcome and accept one another. We can live the Good News of Christ's love, openly and joyfully, as we walk together on the way of Christ.

Let us pray. God of grace, may your Spirit guide us to those who need to hear the good news of your love. Give us words to say and ways to help, as we walk with Christ each day. Amen.