

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 21

Year A

How Is God Calling Us?

[RCL] Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

In March of 1979, a nonprofit organization by the name of the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network was launched. It is better-known by its acronym: C-SPAN. The organization's mission is to provide continuous coverage of the goings-on of the US Government. You may have tuned in on occasion to watch as Congress works—or, depending on your perspective, as Congress *doesn't* work.

Along with American programming, there are also occasionally programs from other countries, including one from the United Kingdom: *Prime Minister's Questions*. The program airs straight from the British House of Commons and features the British Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition party.

The entire program consists of these two figures, along with other members of the House, pummeling each other with rapid-fire and hard-hitting questions, above a cacophony of cheers, jeers, and occasional pleas for “order” from the Speaker of the House. This can go on for hours! One person bounds to his feet and asks a biting rhetorical question, then someone else jumps up with a pithy answer or an even more searing question. It's the political version of whack-a-mole!

If C-SPAN were around in Jesus' day, there might have been a show called *The Messiah's Questions!* Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is berated with all manner of rapid-fire rhetorical questions.

At the outset of the Gospel, John asks Jesus, “Are you the one we have been waiting for?” Then the Chief Priests—the opposition party if ever there were one—ask Jesus one question after another. They ask why the disciples don't abide by the tradition of the elders, they ask about divorce, they ask about taxes, they ask about the role of the Ten Commandments, and on and on it goes until even Pilate himself asks Jesus if he is, in fact, the King of the Jews.

In today's passage in particular, the Chief Priests and the elders ask Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things?” and “Who gave you this authority?” Then Jesus asks a few questions of his own. The Chief Priests and the elders knew how to play politics, and so they decide not to answer—not because they didn't *have* an answer, but because they were afraid of how Jesus might respond to their answer.

And so, Jesus asks yet another question— “What do you think?”—and then launches into a parable about two sons. When their father asks the sons to work in the vineyard, one son says something like,

“Sure! I’ll get right on that!” But he doesn’t follow through in the end. Truth be told, most of us can sympathize with this son. How often have we made a promise or a commitment that, for whatever reason, we couldn’t keep?

But the focus of the parable is on the other son—the one who, unlike his brother, initially says he won’t help out but winds up doing so in the end. We might be tempted to ask why he chose to help in the end— “Did he have something else to do first?” “Was his schedule full?” “Was he angry with his father or his brother?” But if we’re not careful, these questions can bog us down in homiletical quicksand and we can lose the larger, more important point: regardless of what initially prevented him, the son eventually accepted his father’s invitation to go to work in the vineyard.

At its core, this parable is the pattern of our life with God. No matter what we’ve done, or what may have initially prevented us, God is always extending an invitation to us. We are constantly being drawn into a new place—to new depths of faith, to a new place of divine discovery.

No matter if this is the first time we’ve ever heard the Gospel, or if we’ve been faithful Christians for decades, this parable lays bare one incontrovertible fact: God isn’t finished with us yet! The baptized life has no *emeritus* status, and there’s no such thing as a retired or part-time disciple of Jesus!

But here’s the thing: life with God is always forward-looking, always calling us out of the confines of our past and present and into something new. In order to live into God’s invitation, we must be willing to leave the past behind—no matter how comfortable or familiar or profitable—and turn toward the future, complete with all of its uncertainties and questions and anxieties.

And make no mistake: that’s hard!

Consider, for example, the Chief Priests and the elders of Jesus’ day. They had quite a bit invested in the *status quo*. Leaving the past behind meant forfeiting their claims to power and position, which had become their entire identity. Stepping into life with God meant leaving all of that behind, in favor of a future they couldn’t predict and couldn’t control.

How about in our own day?

How willing are any of us to forfeit our positions, our authority, or our privilege? The truth is that, for most of us, the past is pretty enticing—especially when we enjoy privileges we haven’t earned.

But then there are the tax collectors and prostitutes, whose past was marked by derision and servitude; of being treated as things rather than as persons. For them, God’s future brought new life!

This is the essential question that every single one of us must faithfully discern: How is God calling us out of our past or present circumstances, into something new?

The truth is, sometimes the answer to that question is unsettling. After all, for as hopeful and encouraging as the future might seem, it's always uncertain. At least we know our past, even if it is limited and dysfunctional.

As people of faith, we are called to hold that tension between the certainty and comfort of our past and the uncertainty and discomfort of God's future. We're called to ask ourselves how our past has been allowed to determine our future, how it has restricted our ability to live faithfully, and to consider where it is that we find life and joy and peace, versus where we find resentment and fear and death.

We're called to ask these questions of our communities of faith, too. How have our churches become entrenched in the structures and strictures of the past? How does doing the same old thing because we've always done it that way cut us off from new and life-giving possibilities? What parts of our common life together need holding onto, and what needs letting go?

One final word of caution: when we ask these questions from a place of fear and anxiety—wringing our hands over what our future or our church's future will be—these questions bear little transformative power. But if we ask them from a place of discernment and faithfulness, we can be sure that as we do this hard and holy work, God will be with us on the journey.

And in the end, we will find life more abundant!

Amen.

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