

My Messy House

A Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 25th, 2011
Ezekiel 18:1-32; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

“A new heart I will give you,” the Lord GOD says to Israel through Ezekiel, “A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

Jesus has just cleaned house in Jerusalem. In one of the most graphic and memorable scenes from the gospel stories, Jesus has come whirling into the temple, “driving out all who were selling and buying, overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. . . [And] he said to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer”; but you are making it a den of robbers.’”

While Jesus is cleaning that house in Jerusalem, the blind and lame come to him and are healed, just as Isaiah had said long ago about the Servant, the Light to the nations. The children are crying, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” a sure clue that Messiah is in the house. But then, Jesus starts house-cleaning. Of all the offenses that he has committed anywhere, the cleansing of the temple is by far the most offensive to the housekeepers: “They were indignant. . . angry,” Matthew tells us.

The next day, when Jesus returns to that temple, he’s got some answering to do: “By what sort of authority are you doing these things, and who is it that gave you this authority?” There are really only two possible answers: either Jesus’ authority comes from humans or, it comes from heaven; either his authority is a matter of raw power, or it has to do with God’s truth. But instead of giving them an answer, as so often

happens with Jesus, he answers one question with another: “You tell me, did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” They’re stumped, “Um. . . We don’t know.”

Then comes another question together with a story: “What do you think? A man had two kids. . . . Now, I want you to think really hard. Which one of the two kids in the story did what the father wanted? Tell me which one behaved in a way that honored Dad’s authority?” And everybody gets it right this time. It was the first one, that one who answered, “I don’t want to go, and I won’t go to work in that vineyard”; but he later changed what he cared most about, namely, himself, and went to work.

Then Jesus stuns the housekeepers: “I’m telling you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the royal rule of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you didn’t believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you didn’t change what you care most about and believe him.” And furthermore, “You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. . . .’”

Outsiders are going ahead of insiders. Jesus does not say outsiders are going *instead* of insiders, they’re just going *before* them. Jesus had announced it, “Not everyone *who says* to me,

‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the royal rule of heaven, but only the one *who does* the will of my Father in heaven.”

“. . . Be doers of the word,” the Letter of James urges us, “and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”

It’s been said that “the truth of your commitment lives in your heart; and what you do is the measure of what lives in your heart.”

“There was a man who had two kids. . . .” Both were bad boys, in their own way. Both were wrong, in their own way, to dishonor Dad’s authority. In antiquity, a son who publicly says “no” to his father shames that parent and dishonors his family, as in: “George, what kind of a kid have you raised who insults you to your face in public?” Both sons have insulted the father, one by saying “No, I won’t go. . . ,” but then

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goes; and the other by saying “Yes, sir, I’ll go. . . ,” but goes nowhere and does nothing.

In being forced to choose, Dad has to decide between one who appears to be *outside the family* (“I won’t go. . .”) and one who appears to be *inside the family* (“I’ll go, sir . . .”). The outsiders are going ahead of the insiders.

“Not everyone *who says* to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the royal rule of heaven, but only the one *who does* the will of my Father in heaven.”

You see, you can say all the right words but not do anything about them.

“For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you didn’t believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw, you didn’t regret it, you didn’t change what you were most concerned about.”

Remember, on the first page of Mark’s Gospel, in his very first recorded words, Jesus proclaims, “The time has come. The rule of God is near. *Repent* and believe the good news!”

“Repent and live!” thunders the prophet Ezekiel, “. . . Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.” But I suppose that in a culture which has forgotten how to blush, and that counsels us to “never apologize and never explain and never incriminate ourselves,” then the words of the Baptist, the prophet, and Jesus sound worn out, old school, irrelevant, ridiculous, maybe even harmful to one’s self. Yet, each one promises that repentance is life-giving rather than death-dealing: “Turn, and live.”

The very first of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses reads, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘repent,’ he called for *the entire life* of believers to be one of repentance.”

The house of humanity is a mess. The house of the Lord is a mess. I often hear people, inside and outside the church, complaining about what a terrible bunch of people we are in the church; how cruel we are to each other; how we ought to be, oh, so much better than others; what horrible hypocrites we are; how wrong we’ve gotten everything. I guess I heard it earlier: “You hypocrites! . . .

‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. . . .’ And I answer, “Everything you say is true. The house is a big mess: crawling with tax collectors and harlots, chief priests and elders. You decide which one you are. The Lord’s house is a big mess. It’s almost enough to make you think that Jesus likes a messy house with the likes of you and me hanging around it.”

“On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand” But I’m not sure we believe the hymn as we sing it. Often we seem to believe that we’re doing such a smash-up job with our lives; and part of that really smash-up job is showing up here on Sundays: “Oh, yes, sir, I’ll go. . . .” But, we don’t go—not really. Our hearts are far, far from here.

Often we seem fairly content with our comfortable lives, believing we’re doing a pretty good job in comparison to others, and we just don’t need God messing up the house by sending us to work in the vineyard. “No, I don’t want to go, and I won’t go. . . .”

Maybe we don’t even want God messing up our church by welcoming the wrong kind of people into our clean, cozy, comfortable house where we all pretend to be such fine, obedient, dutiful sons and daughters. “Yes, sir, I’ll go”

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I don't know for sure, but I happen to think Jesus is rather happy with a messy house that includes both chief priests and elders, tax collectors and prostitutes, eating together side-by-side at his table. I know that Table always looks so nice and tidy, but those of us who gather there are anything but nice and tidy. We're not. We're a mess. Jesus did say on one of the many occasions when he was criticized for hanging out with sinners, "I have not come to call the righteous, [you who are doing such a smash-up job], but sinners to change what they care most about. . . Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

In other words, if you're already basking in your own goodness, what goodness could Jesus possibly give you? "Let the one who brags," Paul wrote the bragging Corinthians, "brag in the Lord."

In the parable, the first son changes what he cares about. He places the father's authority above his own authority. We sometimes call it "humility." We sometimes say, as in the first of the Twelve Steps, "My life had become unmanageable.," or "I was wrong," or "I needed to go in a new direction," or "I needed to be saved," or "I couldn't do it on my own."

That early hymn (or creed) which Paul quotes in Philippians confesses that Jesus *exercised authority* by emptying himself, not counting equality with God a thing to be grasped, taking the form of a slave: "And being found in human form, he *humbled* himself . . ."

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in *humility* regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . ."

Kathleen Norris writes about a little boy who wrote a poem called "The Monster Who Was Sorry." In the poem the boy explodes about how he hated it when his father yelled at him. In anger the boy threw his sister down the stairs, turned his room into a complete wreck, and then destroyed an entire town. The boy's poem concludes: "Then I sit in *my messy house* and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.'"

Commenting on the boy's poem, Norris writes, "'My messy house' says it all; with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in a fourth century monastic desert," Norris writes, "his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human.

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