

CHANGE

Matthew 21:23-32

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21A)

September 28, 2014

All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

The other day I turned on the radio in the car and heard a conversation about how all the rules in the Middle East are changing. The speaker was predicting that the outward forms of nation states might well last a while but that the reality on the ground will be more tribal or religious, coalitions, sometimes peaceful, sometimes aggressive and so on. He was predicting a kind of return to patterns of life before the West imposed borders and installed rulers. I only heard a snippet of the conversation but the speaker was most insistent that we are witnessing a period of radical change in arrangements about how the world is governed and how faulty assumptions or failure to recognize that change is underway will get Western powers embroiled in real trouble.

Change of any kind is complicated because there is always a measure of loss involved at least for someone: loss of familiarity perhaps or loss of power; loss of security or loss of a beloved person. Change in our world or our personal circumstance

can often bring with it a measure of grief. Of course change is easier when we initiate it for some purpose. It is easier to be someone who leaves a situation than someone who is left. It is easier to be someone who governs change than someone who is negatively affected by it, even if the change in circumstance turns out to be a blessing in disguise. Change in the world or in our personal circumstance can be really tough and will usually be something we resist even if we are not conscious of our resistance. No change however, is harder than a change of heart.

My friend Ed Bacon has written a book called *8 Habits of Love*¹. He gets at this business of the change of heart by encouraging the development of a habit that he calls the 'habit of truth'. It is essentially about practicing listening to our own hearts and being prepared to take action even when we know that the path we are following is not one people who care for us might choose for us. He encourages actions that are not based in fear but rather in love even when the path will lead to conflict. He tells of his own decision to leave law school and seek priesthood within a tradition very different from the one in which he was raised in South Georgia. He tells of the challenges that decision led to for him in relation to his family, his then fiancé and his friends. In another

¹ Ed Bacon, *8 Habits of Love* (Hatchette, 2012)

example, he tells of how he came to embrace pacifism as a fundamental truth for his own life and how risky that seemed when he shared it in an interview at St. Luke's church here on Peachtree Street. He began his ministry there under Dan Matthews, Senior, father of the current Rector. These are great stories of coming to terms with truth that required a change of heart. Many here have stories of how challenging it was to see through difference to seeing the fundamental humanity of others. Some have stories of how challenging it has been to accept ourselves for who we are. Ed recognizes that no change of heart can be completely free of fear. He writes "sometimes we may have to temporarily cut off relations with others in order to establish a healthier foundation for resuming that connection later. This can be a way of affirming that you are in fact, open to the possibility of building a love-based relationship in the future, but to do so, you must turn away from the old destructive narrative for a while."²

It is this kind of change that Jesus is addressing with the Temple authorities in our reading from Matthew. After some theological argument about authority and by whose authority Jesus was doing things like casting out the money changers and healing on the Sabbath, he tells the chief priests and elders of the people "Truly, I tell

² Bacon p. 67

you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” He is not being gratuitously rude. Rather he is comparing the relatively secure and powerful of Israel with the poor and those who can be most willing to change, to turn toward what really matters, to repent and to begin anew. The son in the parable who defied his father and declined to go and work in the vineyard, later *changed his mind* and went. He was the one who was closer to the truth of his life and the claim that is made on it by his father in contrast to the attitude of his brother. His brother didn’t change his mind. He said the right thing but somehow never got around to doing it. Maybe he was busy. Maybe there was no malice involved. But in any event he did not do what he said he would do. We are back to the old truism that we judge others by their actions but we judge ourselves by our intentions. Intentions are not unimportant, but in the end it is actions that matter.

There are a number of clues for us in this story of Jesus’ conflict with the Temple authorities about when we might need to change our minds, --clues that we might need to practice truth seeking and relationships grounded in love rather than fear.

The first is found in the question of authority. If we find ourselves feeling threatened in some way or attacking process when change is under way, then we might need to examine our hearts and minds and sometimes then open ourselves to the possibility of changing our minds. The authority of God will usually be self-authenticating even when it seems to be in conflict with the powers that be, and changing our minds can be quite threatening, especially for first children and intuitive rule followers. Many of you have done that kind of spiritual work in coming to terms with your own acceptance of the full humanity of gay and lesbian friends. Some of you have had to do that work in coming to acceptance of yourself. If we feel threatened by some novelty in our lives, then we *might* need to change our mind.

Another clue is when we find ourselves rationalizing or justifying our position in a calculating way as the authorities did in considering their answer to Jesus. They are trying to be clever to preserve their position rather than really dealing with what Jesus is saying. In an election season we hear this kind of thinking in the spokespeople of both parties (and rarely from the candidates themselves incidentally) when they try and 'spin' situations, actions of others, poll results and much else besides. This is about winning

and is part of our system. However if we start operating that way in our own lives, it is a clue that we might need to change our mind.

If we take a position like the first son and find ourselves thinking about what someone else has said, or musing on our own response –often trying to justify it in our own heart and failing,--then maybe we need to change our mind and do the hard thing.

These are not everyday situations for most of us and are almost always found in connection to some relationship or other rather than –say—our embrace of an idea or philosophy. But when they arise, Jesus is clear, it is the capacity to turn again toward what really matters or to change our mind that is the path of truth and the way to the kingdom of God.

In our silence ask grace that when you need to change your mind you will be able to overcome your fear and grace to trust God for life. This is not a call to relativism, to wishy-washy thinking. I'm not asking that we flip- flop in positions we hold dear. This

is rather an invitation to participate in the expanding possibilities of life in the grace of God. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...