

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
September 27, 2020 17th Sunday after Pentecost

207 South Brodie St. Thunder Bay
<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca>

Words of Welcome

I have been pondering how people answer questions. Does their yes mean yes, or their no mean no? Do some people say no and then respond anyway? Do those who say they will step up to the plate actually follow through? Jesus asked a similar question. Stay with me a while as we together worship God and look at the questions.

Call to Worship

Come to hear the Word.
Come to do the Word.
Come to experience Comfort.
Come to experience Challenge.
Come to find Cost.
Come to find Joy.
Come to find Humanity.
Come to find Community.
Come to find Church.
Come to find God.

—Copyright Katherine Hawker, 2002. Written for the Evangelical United Church of Christ, 1997 and posted on Walker's [Outside the Box](#) website.

Hymn

Stand up and bless the Lord

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1. Stand up and bless the Lord;
God's people now rejoice;
stand up and bless the Lord your God
with heart and soul and voice.
2. Though high above all praise,
above all blessing high,
who would not fear God's holy name,
and praise and magnify?
3. Oh for the living flame
from God's own altar brought,
to touch our lips, our minds inspire,
and wing to heaven our thought.
4. God is our strength and song;
now is salvation ours.
God's love in Christ we now proclaim
with all our ransomed powers.
5. Stand up and bless the Lord;
the Lord your God adore;
stand up and bless God's glorious name
henceforth forevermore.

Words and Music: public domain

Trusting God's presence with us in our time of worship we pray.

Opening Prayer

Steadfast God,

As the seasons change, we see that you are still at work in the world, transforming hearts and situations. We praise you for all you do to repair injustice, bringing peace to places of hostility, working for goodness to prevail among neighbours and nations. You have shown us the true face of power in Jesus Christ, reaching out with healing and hope to touch desperate lives. Let us see the face of Jesus in this time of worship and as the scriptures are opened to us. Fill us with renewed energy and insight this autumn, so that we can join in your work to bring justice and joy into the world you love.

Lord of love, today we confess our sin of indifference. Too often we turn away so we don't have to see pain, suffering or injustice, even when the evidence is right before our eyes. We don't like to feel uncomfortable. We don't want to feel responsible.

In your great mercy, forgive us, Lord. Teach us a new way to live. Give us courage to love others as you love us, and to respond to the cries of others with the humility we have witnessed in Jesus. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

Plant this good news deep in your thoughts:

God loves you; God forgives you; God strengthens you for service.

Thanks be to God. Amen

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In the scripture reading today first Jesus authority is questioned and then Jesus tells a story of two sons. Hear the word of God from...

Scripture Reading Matthew 21:23-32

²³ When 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?' ²⁴ Jesus 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. ²⁵ Did 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?" ²⁶ But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' ²⁷ So 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." ²⁹ He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. ³¹ Which 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.'³² For 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.

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The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Message Matthew 21:23-32 And the answer to the question is?

A number of years ago Ken and I visited The Netherlands. There were many memorable experiences, but one that I have pondered often was when we found ourselves walking around in the Red-Light District in Amsterdam. For those who are unaware, the Red-Light District gets its name from the red neon lights above the some three hundred windows where sex workers ply their trade. When the women are seeing clients, the red light goes on above their door/window so that other customers know to wait or come back later.

Now this, and the volume of people in the area of the district in the evening, was in itself pretty overwhelming for someone coming from a town of 1100 people, but what has always stayed with me was the fact that there was a church in the middle of it all. It is call Old Kirk, a gothic structure from the 14th century which has reached out to the clientele and workers alike throughout its existence.

It is this image of the church in the middle of a red-light district that comes to mind when I see the line that reads, "Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." (v31) Such a statement seems to be contrary to what we expect or even want to believe.

As we take a closer look at the story, some context is important. We are coming up to the last weeks of the Christian calendar and the Sunday in November that celebrates Christ the King. The texts for today and the Sundays that follow, will have a focus on Jesus' authority. Much of the debate regarding Jesus' authority happened the week before his death. So, we find ourselves in a moment where Jesus has been welcomed with a parade into Jerusalem and later that day had also gone into the temple and turned over the tables of the money changers who worked for the temple authorities. He was raising a ruckus and it was not appreciated by those who believed and said they held the power and authority in the temple.

This passage comes the day after Jesus started all the commotion and the Temple elite - the chief priests and the elders - are there, ready to assert their power. They find Jesus teaching in the temple. Now you have to realize that Jesus did not have the blessing of any rabbi for what he was doing. Sure, he had grown up learning the Torah, as so many young men had, but he had no mentor that suggested he be considered a teacher. As

well, right near the beginning of his ministry it was noted that he taught with an authority that seemed different from that of others (Matthew 7: 28-29). Jesus was a threat to the rabbinical traditions as well as Temple worship.

Jesus was also a threat to the status quo that had been in place since the Romans came to rule over a hundred years before. It was through an agreement with the Romans that the Jewish leaders had been able to continue with Temple worship. And one must recognize the historic and important relationship of the Jewish people to the Temple itself. It was a very sacred place.

Particularly people with something to lose, like the honour, respect, and power, as well as wealth that came with being in charge of the Temple, these people were not going to let some guy from rural Galilee come and disrupt, even threaten, what was going on. On top of that no one wanted to deal with the consequences of Roman authorities feeling the need to get involved in disputes that could affect or possibly destroy the Temple and all that it stood for.

This is nothing new, many of our daily conversations in this country are around who is in power, who has authority, and how, when threatened, people retaliate and exert their power and privilege over others. We see it played out daily when one is watching American politics and struggles, but it is also widespread in our own country, in our own city, it just doesn't make the headlines every day.

The chief priests and elders in the story are questioning Jesus' authority. It was a trap. It didn't matter how he answered. So, he did a very rabbi like thing and asked a question back, vowing that if they could answer his question, he would answer theirs. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Tables turned; it didn't matter how they answered, so instead of giving what they knew to be the right answer, they said they didn't know, thereby avoiding more people believing in Jesus authority, or having the crowd turn on them as Jesus, and John before him, were popular figures.

Jesus could have dropped the whole conversation at this point, but he wasn't done pointing out what was going on, and as was his fashion, he told a story.

What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir", but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?

The answer we all have is that of course the first son, though not compliant at first, thought better of it and honoured his father's request. The second son, didn't follow through. All words, no action. To this Jesus responds,

Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For 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.

Prostitutes and tax-collectors were the bottom rung in the social order of the time, and Jesus says, like the son who at first disobeyed and then turned and did what was right for the father, these are the ones, the tax collectors and prostitutes, who will go ahead of the law-abiding, powerful crew who are at the beck and call of the Roman authorities. Those in power, who could say all the right things, did not believe John the Baptizer when he said things had to change. All had to turn to God, be forgiven, and get baptized to show that they were living a new life.

It is all fine and good to look at this story in its historical context, but what does it mean for me and you. Well, I can tell you as a minister it is a little scary as it was those who had authority that were not living as they should. If they could get that far off track it must be very easy for that to happen. So, I try to stay vigilant, knowing that it is often difficult to see one's own shortcomings. It is much easier to see what other people are getting wrong, and this passage was very much about those in charge, not about those who were struggling through everyday to live out their faith.

But it also has something to say to each of us about who we view worthy and welcome. We like to think that Jesus would appreciate all our traditions in the church, how we are working to keep the building and organ in good repair, how we raise money in order to keep the building open, but why we do it is important.

Do we do it for ourselves, but say that we are doing it so others can benefit? Do we really believe that we want our building to bless others, or just say that so that we sound good, but hope that nothing actually changes, especially in regard to the type of person who enter its doors?

I can tell you that I have struggled with the amount of money that goes into building upkeep and wish we gave at least equally to the needs of those who don't have a roof over their heads when they go to sleep at night. That we could care for children whose stomachs ach because they have no nourishment, and school becomes a backdrop for despair as learning is difficult when basic needs are not met.

If you look at this story of Jesus closely you will see that even though Jesus was in the Temple, he was hanging out with those who had no power, no wealth, no standing. The entire Gospel of Matthew hangs on the Beatitudes which Jesus preached at the beginning of his ministry. (From Matthew 5)

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit

4 'Blessed are those who mourn

5 'Blessed are the meek

6 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

7 'Blessed are the merciful

8 'Blessed are the pure in heart

9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, and so on...

Jesus is calling all people to himself, the rich, the poor, the powerful, the helpless, the scared, the brave, white, black, gay, straight, tax collector, prostitute, and minister. Jesus wants to know our hearts, that in all that we do, we believe and trust Christ's authority in heaven and on earth, that we tend to those who have struggles that we cannot begin to understand, but with whom we can share our resources, our love, care and concern, not because we are so good, but because God is good. To recognize that every living being is important to God, but that God has compassion for those who have suffered most and have the least.

God wants to know that what I preach and what we all say is reflected in our actions. That we are doers of the word not just talkers. It means getting into our own heads and hearts to examine what we truly believe about God and what we understand God is calling us to do for others in the world. To see all people through the eyes of Christ and to see Christ in all people.

Thankfully, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have hope, hope that we can be transformed day by day into a reflection of God's grace in the world, and that all people will one day live in the light of God's love and saving grace. Amen.

Closing Prayer

God of our past and our future, God of healing and hope,

We come before you with grateful hearts,

trusting that you walk with us through every situation.

Today we pray for those who facing danger and despair in these times:

those living with hunger that never ends,

those facing daily unrest and violence,

those challenged by the coronavirus pandemic and measures to control it,

and all those anxious about their future...

And we pray for those who work to relieve suffering in these places
and those working to bring justice and peace.

Bless them all with your courage.

We pray for all those wrestling with sorrow or discouragement in any area of their lives;

For those living with illness or pain;

For those bearing up with chronic conditions or disability;

For those who know the grief and change of bereavement...

And we pray for all those who work to bring healing and comfort and agencies which offer support and care in our community. Bless them all with your compassion.

We pray for all who feel helpless or hopeless in this present time:

For those facing unemployment, struggling to make ends meet;

For those caught up in the pain of misunderstanding or broken relationships;

For any working through situations of conflict at home or at work...

And we pray for all who offer guidance and support to face these challenges and for those who lend skills in reconciliation or mediation. Bless all these with your wisdom and patience.

We pray for the ministries of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and for national and international staff members who represent Christ in our name during such challenging times.

We pray for our own congregation and the churches of our Presbytery and Synod, and for ministers, elders and other leaders who seek wisdom for decision making. Help all of us engage each day with faithfulness.

Guide us, encourage us, and inspire us to meet the challenges before us and give us the commitment to keep following Jesus, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Invitation to make an offering

As God's people we bring our gifts, grateful that we have something to share, glad to be part of a network of mission and mercy which circles the earth.

If you would like to make a donation toward the life and ministry of St. Andrew's Presbyterian in Thunder Bay visit our website at <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> for more information.

Christ is our authority, and so we ponder all that we have experienced and learned in our worship of Christ's power, and Christ's glory as we hear...

Hymn

At the name of Jesus

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1. At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him King of glory now;
'tis our God's good pleasure we should call him Lord,
who from the beginning was the mighty Word.
2. Humbled for a season to receive a name
from the lips of sinners unto whom he came.
Faithful, Jesus bore it spotless to the last,
brought it back victorious when from death he passed.
3. Name him, Christians, name him,
with love strong as death, name with awe and wonder,
and with bated breath; this is God the Saviour;
this is Christ the Lord, ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored.
4. In your hearts enthrone him; there let him subdue
all that is not holy, all that is not true.
Crown him as your captain in temptation's hour;
let his will enfold you in its light and power.
5. Christians, this Lord Jesus shall return again,
with his Father's glory and an angel train,
for all wreaths of empire meet up on his brow,
and our hearts confess him King of glory now.

"At the name of Jesus," Words: Public Domain. Tune: KING'S WESTON 6 5 6 5 D; Ralph Vaughn Williams,
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Benediction

Go forth to share God's love with all.
Go forth to share Christ's grace.
Go forth to share the community of the Spirit.
In the name of the Holy Trinity, three in One. Amen.