

September 27, 2020 (Focus: Matthew 21:23-32;) “Are We Guards or Gardeners?”

I never fail to be amazed at how the bible illustrates that famous saying, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Here is Jesus, trying to do a ministry of love and mercy often in the midst of religious leaders who are either afraid of empire or have been coopted by empire (this I say as an ultra-conservative evangelical has just been nominated for the Supreme Court, someone who in the past has been clear that the rights of people of color, of immigrants, of gays, of the poor, of the environment don’t matter, and she can solidify a conservative majority on the court for decades to come. There will be rights to fight for, that’s for sure.)

Here is Jesus, trying to preach a God of love and forgiveness, a saving God, a God of his own tradition, but for a new day, preaching this God in front of religious authorities who see themselves as guardians of a tradition more so than witnesses of a God for their own time and context.

The more things change, the more they stay the same...In other words, these scripture lessons, written so long ago, in quite a different time and place, still speak to us in our time and place. There seems to always be those forces, conserving of the past versus changing for a new day, and they have clashed throughout history, as they are clashing today. The clashing seems to get more ferocious as the fear of what will be lost gets more real for the conserving forces, and as those who seek change fear that we will be pulled back into the past despite all the changes, especially the changes in attitudes and ideas, have come.

As described by Phyllis Tickle in her recent best seller “The Great Emergence,” we are living in the same dialogue as Jesus had with these religious leaders about authority. We are in a time when within our churches and across much of the Christian world we are being challenged with the question of authority. This is not a question of denominational structures, or local church structures for that matter, but a question of where we can best hear of, be embraced by, be liberated with, and be responsible to the God who created, redeemed and sanctified us. Who are Christians to be, in our time and place? This is the fundamental question of identity that the Church in general is struggling with that seems to be coming to a head now.

Another way to look at this is that we are at a door way: do we want to shut the door closed, so all in the room are safe and protected and stay the same, or are

we willing to walk through the door and go out into the world and bless all we encounter?

Shane Hipps in his book, *Selling Water by the River*, has a wonderful quote that captures some of what is going on about this question of authority: "Some, in an effort to protect and preserve the gospel message, have become like the guards in a museum, fueled by fear that its treasures could be damaged or stolen if they are not vigilant in their watch. They have mistaken the good news for an ancient artifact that needs to be protected. But that is not its nature. This kingdom is a lot more like a tree. God is looking for gardeners, not guards. A guard is trained in a defensive stance of fear and suspicion. A gardener is motivated by love and creativity" (*Selling Water by the River*).

All around us we, inheritors of a rich history, can hear the voice of Jesus in a strange cadence that perks up our ears while at the same time causing us discomfort. Help the poor, welcome all to the table, love your neighbor, welcome the stranger, whenever you help the stranger, the person without means, the one in prison, you help me – all these are invitations from Jesus, calls to who we can be, but sometimes they also feel like challenges that maybe scare us or challenge us too much, and so we fall back to a safe position. We desire a faithful response to God's call but wind up as guards in a museum protecting a treasure, not gardeners encouraging new growth.

Are we in need of fresh eyes and changed hearts in order to be faithful to the God revealed to us in Jesus? Should it be a constant challenge for us to follow a person who regularly confronted authorities stuck in their ways in order to bring about new birth, not change for the sake of change, but for the sake of all creation?

We need to regularly examine who we are as the church, to see if we are still following the one we call Christ. We look out at the some in the church and label them Christian nationals for good reason, and condemn their cooptation to the halls of power and corruption. But we need also to look at ourselves and our own ministry: if we ever become so concerned about protecting what we have that we don't do the work of the church, then we are like that son that says we will go to the fields but don't, we are like the chief priests and elders. We should always take care that we are not like the guards of an ancient treasure, but rather be like master gardeners growing both heirloom plants and sturdy hybrids and even creation sustaining butterfly gardens and prairie plantings and rain gardens, and adapting as the garden grows. Why change the garden? Stagnant, weeds taking over, not as productive, but maybe the world needs a different garden now than

it did before...not plantations, but community gardening; not imported hybrids but native plants; not just fancy foliage but intermix with veggies and herbs;

For the one we call Creator calls us not solely to preserve, but calls us to create even and especially at such a time as this. We have already created new ways of gathering, and that is not to say that we won't go back to our traditional in-person gatherings when we can do so safely, but we are sensing that these new ways can augment our old ways in ways that will bless more people.

Maybe the kingdom of God is more truly called the garden of God, and that is a great metaphor for us to ponder as we continue to follow the one we call Christ.

Children's message: If they do it, why can't I? Ok to ask, maybe, if it is something good – they're going to the movies, they get dessert for dinner,... There may be a good reason for it, so ask your parents, and then if don't accept your argument about it, accept the situation (sulking, the silent treatment, etc. not exactly the cool thing to do, especially toward your parents who have a very stressful job as parent right now.

But what about if it something bad? If they do it, why can't I? See politicians behaving badly, going back on their word, lying to us, not following the people's wishes. See others not wearing masks, not physically distancing, having a good time. All seemingly getting away with it.

If they do it, why can't I? Well, we hold ourselves to higher standards, because we follow Jesus' example. Doing what is right doesn't necessarily make us popular; people might call us nerds or geeks or dweebs, suckers or losers or goody-two-shoes...well, let them. They are just mad because someone showed them up; they are just jealous because we were strong enough and courageous enough to do the right thing. We don't need to go with the crowd, when the crowd is doing the wrong thing. We follow someone who showed us that the way of the peacemaker, the way of the person who does the right and kind thing is the blessed way.

Let us turn our hearts and minds to God in prayer. Merciful God, we come to this time of prayer from the world, but the world is very much with us, for the concerns of all creation weigh heavy on our hearts, because we truly care, and because we know things could be better in our world. And so we offer in prayer today what is on our hearts,

We pray for all those whose needs are great and urgent in their lives, but with everything going on in the world, they don't make the news, they don't rise to our attention, but their needs are there none the less and deserving of our prayer and our attention and our help. And so we pray for:

- Those who are in need of healing, body and mind and spirit
- Those who mourn
- Parents and children, teachers and administrators trying to figure out schooling in these strange circumstances
- Families, and people living alone, each struggling in different ways in this pandemic and the forced togetherness or isolation it entails
- People struggling economically, especially those who have lost their jobs, that new paths are opened up to them
- Those continuing to fight fires out west, and those whose homes and communities are devastated by the fires
- Those living in communities devastated by storms, that recovery is swift
- Those who fight for equity and justice for all, no matter the color of their skin, their gender identity, their country of origin, or who they love

Breathe new breath into us, O Spirit of the living God. Fall afresh on us. Help us to breathe new life and new hope into our communities, especially in these uncertain times. With each breath we take, help us to be filled with your patience, your hope, your joy, your strength, your courage, your love.

Moment of silent meditation...

With each breath we take in and exhale, help us to remember that it is through us that your love and mercy flow, that your hope and a vision for a peaceable community of mutual respect and caring will be made real, as we taught to us by the one we call messiah, son of the living God, who taught us to pray to you saying, Our Father...