

Walking Our Talk  
Matthew 21:23-32  
First Presbyterian Church  
October 1, 2017

## Introduction

I'm not quite sure what to call this: it's part sermon... part kitchen table chat... maybe with a bit of a "state of the church" address thrown in for good measure. But you have my word, we will be out of here by 2:00! The Gospel lectionary reading for this morning comes from Matthew 21: 23-32.

<sup>23</sup>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?" <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>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?' <sup>26</sup>But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." <sup>27</sup>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.

<sup>28</sup>"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup>He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

<sup>31</sup>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.

<sup>32</sup>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.

## Sermon

If it's OK with you, I would like to start with a couple of things we all know - First, you and I are living in a time of CHANGE... like Dorothy says to Toto in the Wizard of Oz: were not in Kansas anymore... or as Bob Dylan once sang: "the times they are a changin..." We're living in a time of change – and sometimes it is so significant and happens so fast that it kind of makes your head spin.

We read about it in articles... we hear experts discuss it... but even more we see it with our own eyes... we feel it in our bones, don't we? Even those of us in our 20's, 30's and 40s know how quickly things are changing in the cultural and religious landscape of our world. And there are times, I must admit, that I just want it to stop... I want to press "Rewind" and go back to the way things once were... or at least, to press "Pause" so I can catch my breath. I imagine I am not alone in this.

Yet, the second thing we know is that the kind of change we are experiencing now is NOT THE KIND that we can just hunker down and ride out until it passes. Things will never go back to the way they were before.

Well, I assure you that your church staff and session spend a lot of time and mental bandwidth thinking about how things are changing and how we might lead our church to be faithful to our core mission which does NOT CHANGE – that is to love God completely and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

So, in this time of enormous cultural change we are constantly asking: how do we worship? How do we grow in faith and spiritual maturity? How do we care for one another? How do we invite and welcome others? How do we impact the world around us? How do we serve “the least of these” as Christ did? During this time of significant upheaval and change, how do we BE the church of Jesus Christ?

And as many of you know all too well, this change is NOT ONLY taking place in broader culture and larger church, but within our congregation as well. We have talked about this a good bit over the past couple of years: the changing demographics of our membership... the changing financial landscape of our congregation... the blessings bequeathed to us by previous generations in this church and the need to “pass the torch” of leadership and financial responsibility from one generation to the next.

You’ve no doubt heard people talk about “a new normal.” It’s a phrase used to describe the reality of someone’s life AFTER a major life event... after a birth or death... a marriage or divorce... after a significant illness or job change... folks talk about finding a “new normal”. Well, the truth is that as a congregation we are discovering a “new normal” the make-up of our membership... the way we fund our ministry... the way we worship and do Christian education... the way we do youth ministry and fellowship and mission. These “fundamentals” of our life together are all EVOLVING as we seek to be faithful to Christ’s call TODAY... and as we move into the future. But that’s the thing – the thing about this kind of major, fundamental change – is that we do not (and cannot) know what the future holds. We know WHO HOLDS THE FUTURE, but we don’t know where things are going... or what’s going to happen... which I want to take just a moment to remind you is a pretty FAMILIAR place for God’s people to be. You remember how God called Abram and Sarai to leave all they had ever known and strike out for a place that God would show them... no map... no itinerary... just a promise of God’s presence. And how Jesus called several of his disciples with a simple invitation to “Come and see.” No market analysis... no mission strategy... no long range plan... just “C’mon, follow me.” So this place of not knowing the future, though very uncomfortable FOR us... and often producing a high level of anxiety IN us... is not particularly new to us.

Which is why I want to directly address a question that I know some (if not most) of you are asking – The question is: “Why... in the midst of so much change both outside and inside our congregation... why are we challenging ourselves this fall with an annual campaign AND a capital campaign? Why take on this challenge right now?”

Well the easy answer (the “preacherly” answer) is that we believe it is God’s will for us. This process has taken place over many years and has involved countless people – staff people... committee people... the people of three previous classes of elders... and at several key junctures, every church members has been invited to be a part of this discernment process. And all along, we have asked God to guide and direct us... we have even asked God to scuttle the project if we were heading in the wrong direction... but at each step along the way, the spiritual leaders of our church have affirmed that this project expresses in bricks and mortar the core values of our congregation... they have affirmed the leading and blessing of God.

Though I do not presume to speak for God (or for our elders), I have been an active part of this process... so in the next little bit I want to offer you two reasons WHY I THINK this is God’s will. One reason is practical... the other spiritual... (though I know we shouldn’t separate the two!)

**(Reason # 1)**

I believe that this project takes into account who we are as a congregation NOW and who we will likely be in the foreseeable future. Let me say that again: I believe that this project takes into account who we are as a congregation NOW and who we will likely be in the foreseeable future. First, we are... and will continue to be a church with a good many older members... members who now have or will likely have mobility challenges. According to Mary, 26% (or about one in four) of us is over the age of 65. We all know that one of the hardest things about getting older is the isolation that comes with losing mobility. And I know we are a congregation that wants our senior members to be able to come to this place just as long as they are able. We don’t want anyone to stop coming any sooner than they absolutely have to. And the truth is... as you heard in Beth’s words this morning... responding to these needs is long overdue. So this project is significantly motivated by our desire to make this campus as accessible as is humanly possible.

Second, we are... and hopefully will continue to be a church with a significant number of young families. Listen to this... according to Mary 40% of our members are under the age of 45. Well, these families have babies who grow into children who grow into teens... and this project includes several much-needed improvements to spaces that are dedicated to our young people – again, some of which have not been touched for many years.

Finally, we are now... and I am confident will continue to be a church that plays a significant role in the life of the greater Hickory community... and part of that significant role is that we are a church whose building is used by community groups and ministries to do their good work. Our central location... our proximity to public transportation... the size and functionality of our space... and the sheer generosity of the members of this church to offer its building to the Hickory community make us in many ways Hickory’s “community church”.

Yet, as I have welcomed community groups to this campus I have realized that our building doesn’t make sense to anyone but long time members. Folks who are not familiar with this campus don’t know where to park or where to enter or where to go when they enter. And so one of the ways I see this project is that it seeks to make our building MAKE SENSE... especially to newcomers... by giving us an obvious front door that leads onto the front porch of a house in which all of its rooms are connected by fully accessible hallways and ramps. So for me, Reason

# 1- the practical reason – is that this project takes into account who we are as a congregation NOW and who we WILL LIKELY BE for at least the foreseeable future.

**(Reason # 2)**

The second reason why we are embracing such a big challenge is a more “spiritual” reason – it is that THIS CHALLENGE... this BIG GOAL calls for BIG FAITH. And the truth is (and I don’t want to be overly dramatic here) this is an opportunity that presents itself to a congregation no more than once in a generation. We look back over the history of our church (some 145 years now) and we learn that this is the sixth campaign and building program in our history. That’s about once every 25 years that our forbears in faith heard God calling them to seize a once in a generation opportunity. And they responded by doing precisely what we are doing: by remembering the shoulders on which they were standing... by recognizing the blessing of the buildings and grounds that others had provided for THEM... by talking openly how one generation was passing the torch to the next... by speaking very clearly about money and their financial responsibility to the church... and by directly ASKING their members to take up the mantle and invest in the future of this church... asking them to make the church a priority in their financial decision-making. This is what each of us is now being asked to do. I do believe that this is a once in a generation moment for us... which is why I encouraged our session not to pass it up.

OK, so that was the “kitchen table chat” part... here’s the sermon part (and take heart, it’s much shorter). When I was a much younger man... well before I had children... I started making a list of things my parents said to me that I swore on a stack of Bibles I would never say to my children. It turned out to be a loooong list that included things like: “Why? Because I said so.” Or as my mother said to my sisters: “You’re not leaving the house in that outfit,” which, of course, was followed by: “Wipe that look off your face, young lady.” Or as my father said to me: “You may not think so now, but you’ll thank me later.” Which was similar to one of my all-time favorites: “Son, just remember this is gonna hurt me a lot more than it does you.” Still, at the top of the list there was one saying that just dripped with the kind of adult hypocrisy that teenagers love to point out and condemn: “Do as I say, not as I do.” What teenager wants to hear that? I still remember how indignant I was that my father would hold me to a standard of behavior that he couldn’t meet himself. Of course, what goes around comes around... and now that I’m a Dad... and these same words have come out of my mouth... I understand much better what my father was trying to say.

The story Jesus told the chief priests and elders that day was the story of the Yes and No brothers. They are two children... sons... old enough to work in the family vineyard but still working out their relationship with their father. When their dad asked each of them in turn to go work in the vineyard, the “No” brother said he would not go but later changed his mind and went. The “Yes” brother said he would go, but never did. Which one, Jesus asked his critics... which son did the will of his father? That’s easy, of course... it was the first brother (the No brother) who did the will of his father... because it wasn’t what either boy said that mattered, it was what he finally did.<sup>1</sup> So on one level what we have here is just a story about hypocrisy... which, by the way, has always been the number one charge leveled against religious people –

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor in “The Yes and No Brothers” – a sermon published in *Home By Another Way*, p. 190.

that we say one thing and do another. That we promise to love one another on Sunday and find all kinds of ways to slander, cheat, or just ignore each other on Monday. But even more than the conscious ways we are hypocrites... the ways that are obvious to skeptics outside the church... are the unconscious way we substitute how we think of ourselves for how we actually act. One preacher cuts to the chase, I think. She asks: "Have you ever thought about visiting a sick friend, rehearsed what you wanted to say, decided on a card instead, thought about what a nice gesture that would be, congratulated yourself on your thoughtfulness, and let it go at that? Am I the only one who has ever done that?" she asks.

And then she said: "I believe in doing things like that... I even believe I am the kind of person who does such things, but sometimes I don't do them. I just roll the ideas around in my mind so much that eventually I move on to something else. It's easy to get beliefs mixed up with actions. Right now I know five or ten people who believe they love their families but who spend very little time with them. I know another twenty who believe in protecting the environment but who drive cars that get less than ten m.p.g. I know about a hundred people who believe they are against violence in movies but who stand in line for the next blockbuster... and I even know a few who believe in the American way but who are not registered to vote.<sup>2</sup> Please don't misunderstand – She's not saying that being home every night for supper and driving a hybrid and watching only the Hallmark Channel and never missing an election makes one perfect... but you get the point. As I NOW know my father did... he knew that Jesus was always looking for folks to "walk the walk" rather than just "talk the talk", but he also knew he couldn't always live up to his own ideals – much less Jesus' ideals – so he did what he thought was the next best thing... (almost as his confession of sin) he said: "Son, do as I say, not as I do."

Friends, God has been telling us all along that there is no shortage of people who say or believe or stand for all the right things. What God is short of are people who will go where God calls them and do what God gives them to do. Whether we say yes or no to him is apparently less important than what we actually do. What is most important thing is this: when we look in the mirror WHAT is MOVING? Is it our mouth or our feet?<sup>3</sup>

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, p. 189-190.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, p. 191.