

"Who do you say that I am?" A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
October 1, 2017 Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Matthew 21:23-32

Let us pray together: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

I imagine many of you have heard of Dr. Phil, the TV talk show host psychologist who, on his show, interviews a variety of people with some interesting problems. When asked who was the one person, living or dead, who Dr. Phil would like to interview, Dr. Phil's immediate answer: Jesus Christ. (Feasting on the Word, Year A, v. 4, p. 117)

Given today's reading from Matthew, I don't think it would be wise to do a talk show interview with Jesus. Why? Jesus has a way of turning things upside down, of not giving the expected answers, or questioning your motivations. Jesus would probably end up telling Dr. Phil to sell everything and give the money to the poor and then to join Jesus in his ministry!

In Matthew's biography of Jesus, many questions are posed to Jesus. John the Baptist and Pilate ask about Jesus' identity. Is Jesus the one we've been waiting for? Is Jesus the king of the Jews? To try and trap Jesus, the religious elite asked questions about signs and proofs, divorce, taxes, the commandments. Not to be left out, the disciples asked Jesus who is the greatest among us and how often must I forgive – just to name two.

These questions reveal something about the questioner. With the exception of John the Baptist and Pilate, the questions are self-serving. Some want to trap Jesus, some want to impress Jesus or get something from him. Jesus responds to the questions, but often in unexpected ways that reveal something about the questioner and about God's kingdom. Jesus' answers are about calling on those listening to change their ways and to believe in God's way.

That is the case in today's scripture. The religious leaders who were still reeling from the day before when Jesus had turned over the tables of the money changers in the Temple asked, **"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"** Jesus responds to the questions with a question of his own and a parable which illustrates the point he wants to make. Again, the answer Jesus gives, the parable, reveals something about the questioner and calls those listening to change their ways.

As we read this parable, I think it wise for us to remember that it is easy to judge the chief priests and elders because we know the rest of the story. But as the old phrase goes, when you point a finger at someone, there are three fingers pointing back at you. When we call them the 'bad guys' we're actually turning into a 'bad guy' by that behavior. You are judging just as they judged.

So, the wise question to ask today is not who is wrong or right, but to ask where do I fit in the parable. Am I the son who said he'd work in the vineyard, but did not go. Or am I the son who said no to his father, but later changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard?

We can say that the religious elite were probably the ones Jesus said claimed to obey God, to work in the vineyard, but didn't. They were the ones who kept the requirements of the law and criticized anyone who didn't. Do you fall into this category? Do you criticize those who don't believe as you do? Do you believe that every change made in the Sunday worship service is a travesty? Do you think that things must continue to be done the same way year after year? Do you worry that our congregations are open to 'others' that just might not meet your requirements for being a Christian and a church member?

Or are you one of those people who doesn't fit the expected profile of a believer? Have you failed to live in the right way, have you 'slipped up' from time to time and been looked down upon by some Christians?

This parable is a challenge to each of us. Jesus is asking you and me how we will respond to his message. Will you pretend obedience or be the one to change your mind, to turn around and believe?

This parable addresses Jesus' central question: who do you say that I am? Who do you say Jesus is? Jesus wants our whole self, our whole life. He will do whatever it takes to reveal our misguided priorities and call us to faith – even to the point of death on the cross.

No, Dr. Phil, you don't want to interview Jesus. Jesus has rearranged the world's order. That may not be something you want to hear: tax collector and prostitutes leading the heavenly parade while those who think they should be leading the parade are left with stammering tongues.

Jesus asks you today, **“Who do you say that I am?”**