***WHICH SON?***

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Texts: Amos 5:21-24 and Matthew 21:23-32

The prophets offer us some wonderful words of comfort and hope, but these words from the prophet Amos are not among them. They are a divine indictment that makes us squirm, or should do so, for thus says the Lord:

*I hate, I despise your potluck suppers and liturgical seasons,*

*and I take no delight in your morning worship be it at 8:30 or*

*10:30!*

*Even though you offer me tithes and offerings,*

*I will not accept them;*

*and your contributions to the Building Fund I will ignore.*

*Take away from me the noise of your songs,*

*no matter how beautifully sung;*

*to the melody of your instruments I will not listen.*

*But let justice roll down like waters,*

*and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Just when you think you are doing the right thing, just when you are feeling good about being here and are getting comfortable in the pew (or in front of your screen) – or as comfortable as you can get – Amos comes along and steps all over your toes with golf spikes. He is preaching to those who think they are being faithful, those who believe that what God wants from them is to come to worship each week and drop a little something in the offering plate, as if that alone were being obedient to God’s will for their lives. Not so, says Amos. It is not that God does not want you to worship and tithe, but your worship falls on deaf ears and your gifts go unaccepted if you are not also pursuing justice and righteousness the rest of the week. To offer worship and offerings on Sunday without pursuing justice and righteousness the other six days is self-righteous hypocrisy, not faithfulness.

Paul would add love to that list of things we have to do. If you sing like an angel or do wonderful things or speak noble words or help little old ladies across the street, but have not love you are just a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal, a squeaky wheel, a self-righteous hypocrite. You can try to convince yourself that God can’t possibly expect that much from us, but it is there in the words of the prophets, in the teachings of Jesus, and in the letters of Paul. God wants from you justice, righteousness, and love each day, every day, all your days. God wants more from you than just

avoiding acts of injustice or

forswearing blatant self-righteousness or

refraining from overt acts of hate.

God wants you to **do** justice, **pursue** righteousness, and **love** God and your neighbor. We all probably know that somewhere deep in our hearts; we know that God wants more from us than this one hour a week, and we might even be willing to agree to it, to commit to it, to pledge to do it. But is that enough? Is it enough to **say** we will do justice, to **say** we will pursue righteousness, to **say** we will love God and our neighbors?

No! We have to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. Stephen Carter is right when he suggests that integrity is not just discerning what is right, but acting on it even at personal cost. We shouldn’t be ashamed for choosing the right; we should act on our choice.[[1]](#endnote-1) Integrity is a reflection of a person who is undivided, whose belief and action are consistent, whose promises are not only made but are actively being fulfilled. We are called to live with that kind of integrity, striving to be who God calls us to be, not merely a shadow of that person.

The parable Jesus tells to the chief priests and scribes in Jerusalem speaks to that kind of integrity. After entering Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to a cascade of waving palms and shouts of hosanna, Jesus enters the temple, clears it of the money-changers and dove salesmen, and then leaves the city for the night. It is the morning after Palm Sunday, the morning after he has created a near riot in the temple, that Jesus returns there to teach and preach. If you wonder why the chief priests and elders came running to meet Jesus that morning, it was not out of eagerness to hear him or to see him work some miracle. They came to confront him, to hold him responsible for the damage he had done the day before and, if possible, to silence him.

Upon finding him, they challenged his authority to preach and teach and heal, his authority to break the law, his authority to disrupt temple life. These were men whose authority was firmly grounded in religious tradition. By what authority did Jesus act? That was their question. Jesus would not answer them unless they answered a question he posed: Was the baptism of John of divine or human origin? The question posed a dilemma for the chief priests and elders, for if they said “divine,” then they would be unable to explain why they had not listened to him. But if they said, “human”, then the crowd who had believed in John’s divine call would be upset with them. So, in fear of the crowd they refused to answer, and because they refused to answer his question, Jesus refused to answer as well. Imagine, someone in a position of authority refusing to do the right thing in fear of losing face with the masses! And Jesus could have left it there, but he did not. He told them this parable about two sons – two brothers and their father.

The Bible is full of stories about two sons. Cain kills brother Abel. Jacob steals the birthright of Esau. Moses and Aaron get along a little better and work hand in hand to deliver the Hebrews from Pharaoh. Jesus calls two sets of brothers as disciples: Andrew and Peter, and James and John the Sons of Zebedee. Mary and Martha bring a little gender balance into the mix as followers of Jesus with their brother Lazarus. And Jesus tells perhaps the best known parable about two sons – the prodigal and his older brother. Our story of faith is entwined in family, in relationships of brotherly love and sibling rivalry and family conflicts. Perhaps that is why Jesus casts our relationship to one another in family terms; we are brothers and sisters in Christ, one family of faith with God as our ever-loving, ever-patient parent. This parable is a story of family told to self-righteous family members – the chief priests and elders – and today retold to brothers and sisters, to you and to me.

A man had two sons. He asked both to go and work in the vineyard. One said, “I will go,” but he never showed up. The other refused to go, but later he changed his mind and went as his father had asked. “Which did the will of his father?” Jesus asked. “Was it the one who said what his father wanted to hear or the one who did what his father wanted him to do?” It is a question about integrity and redemption. Neither brother does what he says he will do, but only one fulfills the will of his father – the one who goes.

The second brother tells his father what the father wants to hear: I will go. But his promise is empty, for he doesn’t go. Apparently he believes it is enough to tell the father what he wants to hear. He can placate him with words without having to back up the words with action. Did the father only want to hear his son say, “I will go?” Or did he indeed want him to go and work in the vineyard as he had asked? You know this son, this daughter, all too well:

She asked you to pray for her child, and you readily agreed but you

have not thought of her since. Well, you’ve been busy…

You swore you would be more faithful but you haven’t been to

church in three weeks. But the weather was so good…

You made a New Year’s resolution to read your Bible daily but thus

far have managed only sporadic study. Well, it’s only

October…

You pledged to share a little more of your wealth in thanks to God,

but there are so many things you need and the economy is a

little uncertain…

You said you would work for justice, would let it roll down like

waters in your hands, and you will some day, some time, some

place when you have the time, when the situation is right…

You said you would let righteousness flow through your life like an

ever-flowing stream, but you know there’s been a drought…

You said you would go to the vineyard, but you haven’t gone – yet.

“Which son did the will of his father?” asks Jesus. “Which daughter does the father’s will?”

Then there is the first son, who spurns the father’s request and refuses to go. He will do what he wants to do, not what the father wants him to do. But then he has a change of heart, a change of mind, a change of will, and he goes. What changed his mind, heart, and will? Jesus doesn’t say, so perhaps it doesn’t matter. The point is he goes where his father asked him to go to do what his father asked him to do. He is the one who does the will of his father. It is obvious even to the chief priests and scribes, obvious even to you and to me. The one who does the will of his father is the one who goes, the one who shows up at the vineyard, the one who satisfies his father’s request by action, not just words. There is redemption here – redemption from the initial refusal, redemption by obedient action, redemption by fulfilling the father’s request.

You know this son too. He is the son who stars in movies – Han Solo flying in to rescue Luke in a *Star Wars* battle after saying he would not fight, Simba returning to reclaim the throne from his evil uncle Scar after running away in *The Lion King*, Peter returning to save the day as Spiderman after retiring to live a normal teenager’s life. He is the tax collector, she is the prostitute who blatantly violated God’s will for their lives, but after listening to Jesus dared to believe that the kingdom was at hand, repented – that is had a change of heart, mind, and life – and became disciples. This son is Saul who became Paul. This son is the one who does God’s will, however late in life, because he – or she – has a change of heart and decides to obey. This is the son who enters the Kingdom of God ahead of all the self-righteous hypocrites, including the chief priests and elders and Sunday-only Christians. But is this son, you?

Which son are you? Which daughter are you? The one who talks the talk or the one who walks the walk? There is still time for a change of heart, still time for a change of life, still time to go and work in the Lord’s vineyard as God asks, still time to live so God can use you – anywhere, Lord, anytime! There is time, not just to sing those words, but to live them! Amen

1. Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity*, BasicBooks: New York, 1996, p.7 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)