St. Matthew's Lutheran Church & School – Oconomowoc, WI
18th Sunday after Pentecost– Year A
Proper 21
Matthew 21:23-32
September 27, 2026

Sermon: Matthew 21:23-32
The Reality of Real Repentance

Growing up it was common that I had a list of chores to do every day. They varied depending on what was needed to be done. There was the classic, clean your room. There were the others like sweep and mop the kitchen floors, clean the bathroom, vacuum the living room, take out the garbage, etc. I was always eager to say, "Yeah, I'll do it. I'll get my chores done. It was easy to say that. However, when there were times when I forgot to finish the list because Little Mac had Mike Tyson to beat and Mario had owls to stomp and the result of that was, "We aren't going out for pizza because the chores didn't get done." I said the right thing, but I didn't do the thing I was supposed to do. Jesus has a strong lesson to teach us today regarding saying the right thing versus doing the right thing and what it means for us when it comes to a repentant heart.

The day is Tuesday of Holy Week. The location is the temple courtyard. The audience was primarily the chief priests and elders of the people, the people that everyone else looked up to and listened to, but also it was anyone else that might hear the conversation Jesus has with them. The chief priests and elders were watching Jesus closely, not because they wanted to learn from Jesus but because their hatred drove them to keep their enemy close. Jesus wasn't sneaking around or being subtle. He rode into Jerusalem on Sunday on the back of a donkey with the crowds pushing and peaking to get a glimpse of him as the palm branches waved and shouts of "Hosanna" filled the air. Remember what the leaders said? "Tell the people to be quiet!" "If I tell them to be quiet even the rocks will cry out." On Monday Jesus enters the temple courtyard with the ambiguity of an airhorn on full blast as he tips over tables and sends coins clanking because they turned God's house into a place of profit. Jesus had no plans to enter Jerusalem subtly. You could imagine how these actions, both the crowd on Sunday and Jesus on Monday, sent their blood pressure into the stratosphere. What really put it over the top was that people were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. How could this be happening! How did everyone else not see him as the threat to their authority that he was? They could not let this stand. Certainly not during this week, the week when Jerusalem was full of people coming to celebrate the Passover. The elders and chief priests come directly for Jesus.

If they only knew what was in store for them. The turning over tables was the preview. They haven't seen anything yet. The elders and the chief priests saw Jesus actions as a direct threat to their authority, and for good reason, because it was. Who did Jesus think he was? How did he think he was going to get away with that? Who gave him the stamp of approval to do what he was doing? The implication of their accusations was this: we are the religious authority, the people listen to us, we make the calls when it comes to what happens at the temple, and what you are doing certainly didn't come from us, so what do you think you are doing? Jesus responds with a question of his own and if they answer then he will answer their question. ***"John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" (Matthew 21:25).*** This sends the religious leaders into a conundrum of condemnation because if they answer correctly, they have no choice but to acknowledge that Jesus is the Savior. After their unholy huddling together, they refuse to answer Jesus' question because they recognize the predicament he put them in. Here is what Jesus was really getting at in their hearts, "You don't want to talk about the real issue. You don't want to talk about the real stuff. You don't want to talk about the real spiritual matters of sin and repentance, then I won't answer your question either. You are satisfied with the superfluous on the surface. You are satisfied putting on the show for everyone. You want everyone to see your outward actions, but you are unwilling to really look at the heart. You are unwilling to deal with the reality of sin and what true repentance means. You don't really want to go there.

Do we? Are we willing to go there? I'm not talking about others and people out there and 'Yeah, all those wicked people in the world that need to repent.' I'm talking about you and me. I'm talking about your heart and mine. Are we willing to go there and deal with real sin and real repentance or are we satisfied just with the surface and hope that God is too? Oh, the little Pharisee lurks deep within us all that says, "As long as I can put on the outward appearance for others, I can hide my sin." I'm afraid to admit my sin because of how I will look to others and how I look to others is more important to me than my relationship with God.

The elders and chief priests didn't want to go there, so Jesus makes them. He tells a story about a father and two sons. The father tells the first son to work in the vineyard, and the son gives the surprising reply, "No." He said that he isn't going to work in the vineyard, later, however, he changes his mind and does. The father said the same thing to the

second son. That son said, "I will go," but then he doesn't. The first son didn't say the right thing, but then does the right thing. The second son says the right thing but doesn't do the right thing. The key question from Jesus, ***"Which of the two did what his father wanted?" (Matthew 21:31)*** Jesus sets up the question that the leaders must answer because the answer is so obvious to them that they can't avoid it. Of course, the first son did what the father wanted. It's the principle, "Don't just say the right thing, but do the right thing." The leaders acknowledge the right thing isn't saying it but doing it in action.

Jesus said to them, "***Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him." (Matthew 21:31-32).*** It's difficult to put into words how shocking and upsetting that statement from Jesus was for the leaders. In their mind it didn't get worse than that. If you were reporter in the crowd that day you could have asked the follow up question to Jesus, "You mean to say that tax collectors, who were seen as traitors to the nation and sold their loyalties for money at the expense of their fellow Israelites, and prostitutes that were seen as morally deprived and bankrupt, you are telling me that they are entering the kingdom of God before the religious leaders that worship at the temple, bring their sacrifices for everyone to see, they bring all their sacrifices and offerings for all the major festivals, they know the Old Testament backwards and forwards? You are telling me that is the case? These people that would have been looked at as having no morality are part of God's kingdom and the religious leaders aren't?

Jesus' answer to that question is yes. Why? The reality of real repentance is a matter of the heart, not show. Repentance flows from a heart that is changed by the gospel. Jesus states it very clearly for us. The tax collectors and prostitutes believed the gospel. They believed the message that John preached. They believed when John pointed to Jesus and said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" They believed when John looked at Jesus and said, I am not worthy to untie his sandals. He must become greater; I must become less. It was because he is the Savior. They believed that message and the chief priests and elders rejected it. They were more concerned about preserving their authority, power, and prestige than they were with their relationship with God in true repentance.

That's a lesson that Jesus wants us to take to heart today. Those that were seen as reprehensible teach a lesson in the reality of real repentance. Repentance has sorrow over sin, but it doesn't stop there. That's like the son that says the right thing but doesn't go work in the vineyard. A repentant heart recognizes my sin and there is sorrow over sin. We also heard that last week from David with a contrite heart. A repentant heart doesn't keep clutched to sin. A repentant heart that flows from faith trusts in the One that came to take our sin. A repentant heart looks to the Son that isn't mentioned in the lesson. It's the Son that both says the right thing and does the perfect thing. It is the Son that said, "Not my will be done, but your will be done." Then he came on this earth and, "…***did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6-8).*** The Son that came and died on the cross for you. You don't have to hide. You don't have to pretend. You don't have to look the part on the outside and hope no one notices what we don't want them to see. Christ took it all away. Christ paid for it all on the cross. Christ did all the work for us. A repentant heart trusts completely in him and seeing the full extent of what Christ has done for us we have a change of heart in the gospel. A heart that desires to turn away from sin. A heart that wants to live for him who lived for us. That's the reality of real repentance. Amen.