

The past couple of weeks, we've been listening to Jesus as he spoke with his disciples offering guidance on what it looks like to be his follower, one who helps to bring about the realm of heaven. Jesus has talked about how to handle conflict in the faith community. He's talked about how many times to forgive someone, which can be summed up as – if you are keeping track it isn't really forgiveness. And Jesus has taught about how God is not fair when it comes to God's love, but rather God is generous – giving and distributing love even to those who we might think don't deserve it.

Today, there is a scene change. Jesus is no longer standing around his disciples, but rather he is standing in the temple of Jerusalem surrounded by the religious authorities. And the tension is thick. Just a couple of verses before this passage, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, with people waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna in the highest!" So we're in "Holy Week" as today's passage unfolds. Jesus is not only in Jerusalem, he has entered the temple complex, that holy and sacred space where there were people selling animals for sacrifice and exchanging Roman money for Temple money, and he tore the place apart. Flipping over tables yelling and screaming, driving out, because as he put it, they were turning his house of prayer into a den of thieves.

Now, imagine that Jesus comes into *your* house, breaks the windows, flips over the furniture, and then has the *nerve* to show up the *next* morning. Well, that is where our story picks up. It's the next morning and Jesus has re-entered the temple area that he had torn apart the day before. And it is important to remember that, to the religious authorities, Jesus is a temple "nobody." To them he is this unwashed preacher from the streets, who comes striding into town like he's the Messiah.

Which would be like me trying to walk straight into the House of Congress in Washington, D.C. so that I could tell them how to do their job. They would laugh at me and say, "And who do you think *you* are?"

Which is exactly the question the religious authorities in charge of the temple ask Jesus. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Who do you think you are Jesus, strolling in here and destroying our temple marketplace and acting like you own the place? What gives you the nerve to do that? They ask him because they think they are the only ones with that authority.

Well....it's not like Jesus can say, "God told me to do it," because that would just sound crazy. So like a good rabbi, Jesus answers the question with a question: "Tell me something. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Interestingly, Jesus turns the attention away from himself and towards John the Baptist. That other rag-tag street preacher, who got thrown in jail for being a threat to the religious authorities and then had his head cut off by King Herod, an actual person with religious authority in Israel.

And with this question, Jesus traps them. They *can't* say that John was from heavenly origin or else they will be asked why they didn't follow him. And they can't say he was only of human origin, because that big crowd gathered around Jesus thinks of John as prophet and they just might revolt and causes trouble if they say he was only of human origin. So they punt and say, "We don't know."

Why does Jesus turn the attention to John? Well, John was another person who was challenging what it meant to have authority. John was the one who invited people out into the wilderness for a baptism of repentance, which Jesus participated in. This wasn't standard religious practice. It wasn't the way things were supposed to be. People were supposed to go to the *temple* for their religion and to sacrifice an animal to have their sins forgiven, but John was just offering it freely by the lakeside. As you can imagine, this threatened the big wigs in the temple.

So by pointing to John, Jesus is saying, "Well, I'm like John. I come from the margins. I come from the outsiders, just like John. And you couldn't see God at work in *John*, so how could you possibly see God at work in *me*?"

Having established that his is an authority quite different from anything *they* could imagine, Jesus now carries things in a somewhat different direction by doing something Jesus is uniquely good at doing. Jesus tells them a parable that I'm sure got them scratching their heads. It's about a man who had two sons. He asks the first to go and work in the vineyard and the son says no. But then a couple of hours later, the father looks outside and there he is working away at the vines. The father asks his second son to go out and work in the vineyard. This son says yes, but then *four* hours later, he's still on the couch playing whatever we might imagine was the first century equivalent of video games. Jesus asks these religious authorities which one fulfilled the will of the Father. Of course, they know the answer – the first one. The one who obeyed.

Simple enough...but do you think the temple authorities “got” it? Jesus wanted them to see *themselves* in this story: to change their minds about what constitutes authoritative and faithful service to God. But they didn’t. Jesus seems to be telling them, changing your mind, if it sets you on the path toward God, is a good thing. To change your mind is to be open to something new.

For the Pharisees and the temple authorities, they had no interest in changing their minds about what God could be up to. For them, God and God’s action was confined to what, to them, was familiar – the temple. It was quite literally God in a box. God could not possibly be at work in a crazy man out by the lake offering baptisms of repentance, and therefore God certainly couldn’t be at work in this peasant carpenter’s son from Nazareth who is causing trouble in the temple, knocking over tables and telling people to get out.

They couldn’t or wouldn’t see it. They couldn’t be open to God doing something new. But even – and perhaps especially – the people who seemed godless (like the tax collectors and prostitutes) *could* see it.

And so we are confronted with the same question: Right here, where we are situated, the Episcopal Church on New Hampshire’s Seacoast, can God do something new? Can God be at work inviting you to change your mind on something you have gotten perhaps a bit too comfortable with?

Perhaps there’s a lesson to be learned from Sara Miles’ story. Sara Miles was raised a devout atheist, and as a result, she was never baptized as a child. But then, during a particularly difficult time in life, at the age of 46, she found herself wandering into a church. She had never heard a Gospel reading, never said the Lord’s Prayer, and had no interest in becoming a Christian. But then, inside there were 20 people holding worship and they invited her in. And to Communion. And she went. And there, at God’s Table, she discovered a faith that fed her – literally. And that newly discovered faith led her further into the trenches of hunger and food insecurity as she proceeded in the years ahead to turn that church into a food pantry for hungry people in San Francisco.

Now, she is a well-known and highly sought after speaker and author – and, today, a devout Episcopalian. All because, unbaptized, she was invited to the table of Holy Communion. Could God be at work doing something new with people like Sara Miles, inviting the Christian church to make more room at our Communion tables for people we wouldn’t typically invite there?

I can tell you – her story changed my thinking. I was, for many years, strongly resistant to the notion of opening Communion to those who were not yet baptized. I *still* feel at least somewhat uncomfortable with it, even after several years of offering just such an invitation to the Table. It rankles the “Covenant Theology” that I have lived by for most of my adult life. But hearing her story helped me see that maybe I needed to change my mind and open myself to the possibility that God could offer grace in ways I had not previously imagined.

So, can God do new things? And if so, what new thing might God be up to now? In the world? In this church? In your life? Because the moment we try to put God into a box and try to *keep* God there, like an old treasure in a museum in need of protecting, is the moment God will break out. In an unknown carpenter’s son from Nazareth who will speak of God’s love and forgiveness to people who will kill him. In courageous Christians inviting those not yet in the Covenant into the sacraments, and those who are new to Christianity brave enough to partake.

God is up to something new in the world. God is up to something new in us here on the Seacoast. God is up to something new in *you*. And we are called to go out and look for it. And not only that, but to *participate* in it. Amen.