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## Saying Yes

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*Matthew 21:23-32*

We all know the struggle of making a change. Anyone who has ever tried to lose weight, go regularly to the gym or take a fast from Facebook can tell you that it is hard. It's not easy because our brains are wired to all the old habits we've held for many years.

My theory is that the same holds true with discipleship. We want to follow Jesus. We want to live out our faith and build God's dream for the world. But old ways hold fast. We can't muster kindness for the crabby relative. We get confused about which cause to support – Habitat for Humanity, the Poor People's Campaign, the Sierra Club? We're worried about so many things that we do little for anything.

With the pandemic, discipleship has seemed even more insurmountable. We are busy doing all the things we did Pre-Covid plus all the new things that Covid life demands of us. We are doing our best just to keep all the balls up in the air. We are doing our best to not sink into despair.

So can't we do God's work next year after the vaccine? For now, can't we simply put all our spiritual gears into neutral? Can't we welcome the stranger, take care of God's creation and engage in justice in 2022? Jesus --please just give us a break.

The religious leaders in the temple that day might have wanted a break from Jesus, too. From their vantage point, Jesus was doing nothing but stirring up trouble for them. Before the conversation we heard today, Jesus had turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple and openly challenged traditions that religious leaders were charged to protect. In response, those fed-up leaders had a few questions for Jesus. "Who do you think you are?" they asked him. "Who gave you the authority to come in here and tell us what God wants and what faithful living entails? Where are your credentials? Where did you go to seminary? What church do you attend? Where do you get the authority to do what you do and say what you say?"

This is not the first time Jesus had been baited to enter a debate. So, with a blend of wisdom and cunning, Jesus responds by asking a question of his own. He asked them who gave John the Baptist authority. It was a trick question. Jesus knew full well that if the religious leaders said, “from God,” then they would reveal to everyone they had been ignoring God’s will by not listening to John and following Jesus. But if the leaders said John got the authority from humans, then the crowd would turn on them because the crowd believed John was a prophet. The religious leaders were in a bind. And when they realized their dilemma, they took the coward’s way out and pleaded ignorance: “We don’t know.”

But Jesus didn’t let these religious leaders off the hook that easily. He took an extra step with a parable. He wanted to press his point, to give a lesson and to proclaim yet one more time that the reign of God had come. Because if people see the world differently they may act differently.

A father asks his two sons if they will go and work in the vineyard for him. The first son quickly says no but later has a change of heart—the Greek verb could be translated as “a change of what one cares about”—so he goes off to work. The second son, who wants to please his father says, “I will go, sir.” But then he never gets around to it. “Who,” Jesus asked the religious leaders—the ministers and elders—“did the will of the father?” This was a slam dunk, they thought, the answer is the first son did the will of the father. Sure, he was wrong at the start, but he realized it and changed. The second son said all the right things but did nothing. He stayed the same. Now after hearing their response, Jesus seized the moment.

He told the religious leaders they had just convicted themselves. They were behaving like the second son. They said all the right things. They believed all the essential tenets. They passed all their ordination exams. But even while saying yes to God, they were acting out a big *no*. From Jesus’ perspective, they had perhaps said all the right things, even believed the right things, and even signed up to work but had not actually *shown up* for work.

Jesus pressed the point. “And by the way, those unscrupulous tax collectors and prostitutes, all those disposable people, are going into the kingdom ahead of you.” It is no surprise that that later that week, these religious leaders decided to put Jesus to death. He was accusing powerful religious folks, assured of their importance, of substituting their beliefs *about* God for their obedience *to* God.

These religious leaders, sadly, had too much at stake in the past –like an old habit, it had forged their primary identity and, whatever its limitations, they clung to that identity – and so they refuse to trade that past for an open future.

Jesus was asking them to change their minds, to reconsider what they thought to be true, and to believe that God was working for the renewal of their lives and of the world. And here’s the thing: Jesus makes this same promise to us. No matter how daunting our present circumstances may be, or how large the fears we hold for the future, no matter what old memories imprison us in guilt or shame or grief – the future is still open. We do not have to drag our past on our back the way a snail does its shell. A new and vibrant discipleship remains open to us.

I can’t tell you what that may look like. But I can assure you that as you live out your discipleship in Christ, it will open and flourish in your heart and our world. In the words of William Sloane Coffin “None of the twelve disciples had any of the so-called "advantages" – education, wealth, social status. They were as ordinary as they come, which makes the point that Christ is not looking for extraordinary people but for *ordinary* men and women who do ordinary things extraordinarily well.”( *William Sloane Coffin, Credo*)

*Blessings on your journey.*