

The In Crowd

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Matthew 21:23-32

21:23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

21:24 Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

21:25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'

21:26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

21:27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

21:28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

21:29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.

21:30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

21:31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

21:32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

There are many kinds of fear: fear of heights, and fear of public speaking; fear of food we have not tasted and fear of changing where we live or who we live with. There is fear of trying a new job; fear of crowds; fear of being embarrassed. And there is fear of people who are different from us.

Near the beginning of my ordained ministry, in the city of Pittsfield, just over the river and up some hills from here, I offered a class to address just one kind of fear. In a fit of good humor, we entitled it "Chickens Anonymous." It was an opportunity to overcome *fear of speaking in public*. More than a dozen people showed up for the class. Now, I figured I *knew* about fear of public speaking—I had my own experience, when I first stood to preach. I had experienced something biblical: the tongue "cleaving to the roof of [my] mouth." I had discovered a brand-new twitch in the corner of one eye, and feeling like I was going to go through the floor of the pulpit and be swallowed up by the earth. So I thought I knew about this

fear. But for starters, just to get us talking, I asked folk in that little group to describe what they were afraid of.

It was a humbling experience. No two people had the same kind of fear. One person was afraid to read the bible out loud in front of people, lest she make a mistake. Someone else just had general fear of standing up in public. And one, an experienced public speaker, had a very specific fear. “It is easy for me to talk about programs, or graphs, or priorities,” said he. “But I can’t get personal. I start to get all red. I choke up. If I try to talk about myself, nothing comes out.”

What started as a fixit *for simple nervousness* class was in danger of being a group therapy session, led by someone without qualifications. I don’t know what anyone else learned that spring, but the teacher learned two valuable lessons. One: Don’t assume that you know what someone else’s situation is. Two: Fear comes in every imaginable form and size.

Today, I want to ask you to reflect with me on ***a profound fear shared by almost every human sometime***. I am talking about fear of our neighbor. There are all kinds of neighbors we can be afraid of, and all kinds of ways that fear can manifest itself. For example, we lit candles today to assert that everyone is welcome here, openly affirmed, without regard to gender or sexual orientation. Over the years, many of us here experienced homophobia... fear of gay and or lesbian neighbors. It has been taught in the church, used to be encouraged in the schools, and was the stuff of every day ordinary bullying. Gay and lesbian people have experienced this, on the receiving end. Some of you even know what it is to experience it on both ends.

Most of us carry more than one kind of fear...as a child I was deathly afraid of people in hospitals with tubes in their arms or nose. Sound silly? No pastor wants that kind of fear like a pastoral millstone around her neck, by the time you hit your first hospital visit. It tends to put unnamed fear in the middle of things.

Whether it is homophobia, or racism or some other fear of your neighbor, I would like to take a moment to ask you all to group up in twos or three—and answer with each other—What kind of neighbor were you afraid of, early in life? And where did the fear come from? We will take just three minutes—so take time to listen as well as speak. What kind of neighbor did you fear, and where did the fear come from? Only one rule here—you are not allowed to share with anyone else what your neighbor told you—can you do that?

OK, folks, I am not going to ask you to call out your earliest fears here—just keep them fixed firmly in your mind, as you listen to the fears of the establishment crew in Jerusalem, in 33 or whenever it was AD.

In the time of Jesus, fine upstanding folk were afraid of people who lived on the edges, the margins of their world. And the two groups of people that most symbolized those fears, that distaste and prejudice, were tax-collectors and people in prostitution. Low level tax collectors, had to get an extra little cut, just to survive, an informal kind of commission. Chief tax collectors, on the top, were pretty well-to-do, because they got a cut of the cut... and they all had power derived from their ruthless employers. Who is going to like someone in that role? Scuzzy

at best. Prostitution was an occupation relegated to women and youth with no other means of support, then as now. Now these weren't the only people the righteous and the holy looked down on. It was a symptom of a broader fear. The fear they had took the form of seeing many groups of people as unclean—not good to associate or eat with, or even speak to. Anyone who might be infectious; foreigners... sound familiar?

Jesus came along, breaking through all these boundaries, touching the potentially infectious, talking to the women the upright suspected were unclean, healing the child of a foreigner, eating dinner with a tax collector here, and a suspected outlaw there. And he challenged everyone else to do likewise. "By whose authority?" was the question the power people threw at him. That's the same question the privileged ask every time someone threatens the usual boundaries of who is in and who is out, who is clean and who is dirty, who is respectable and who is to be treated as invisible.

"There were two sons," Jesus told them. "And their father told them to go into the vineyard and get to work. " He told them that the first son grumbled and refused, then thought better of it and went to work. The other one talked a good line, but when it came down to what he DID, no action." And then Jesus went on. These people you look down on, he explained, these women and men listened to old John the Baptist proclaiming his message of compassion and justice, and started to treat other people well, share what little they had, live by the law of Love. "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the new order [Kingdom] of God ahead of you. For John came to you on the path of justice and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

The same Jesus who walked among the people of long ago is walking through our city and this church today. Over the last fifty years, Emmanuel Friedens friends, you have worked hard at listening to Jesus Christ and you have had your own prophets and teachers who came proclaiming a new way: pastors who challenged you to confront racism without and within; who insisted on women's rights and the dignity of every woman rich or poor. Gay and lesbian and straight friends have helped you confront the profound reality of homophobia. I think almost everyone in here could stand and give testimony to some kind of internalized fear of the Other that you have personally confronted and overcome.

No one is going to say we are all done, have it all sorted out. But we have begun this pilgrimage! It is the path to a world wherein Love creates new ground rules, for who we befriend and how we relate. It is a pilgrimage full of joy! It is a journey full of new life! And the world around us is struggling with the same kinds of fear we have faced and continue to face.

In the last months we have had very public reminders that to be a young black person or Latino in the USA continues to be hazardous to one's health, because of fear- fear that leads to crazy acts of violence on front porches and city street corners. The risk extends to young Asian-Americans as well. Sometimes the press acknowledges the danger in just being a woman. What we have not seen stated as clearly in the news is the fear of people in poverty. Just as in Jesus' day when you mix poverty with these other factors, it is a potent cocktail of fear.

You and I know that Jesus calls us to a different way. It is exciting to be here in this church, on this street corner, a crossroads of humanity, one little city street where you might run into someone from any walk of life, any occupation, any class, any kind of home or homelessness. What an opportunity! What a great place to throw open the doors of the church and invite humanity to be part of the still new Jesus movement. What a great place to experience the Love that brings us together, people who might never have talked, a generation ago. And yet what a great place for arousing the last bits of whatever fear we carry.

How do we overcome our fears? When I was twenty-five, I might have had an easy answer. But then I led that lovely class, “Chickens anonymous.” Know what? We live in a world where almost everyone needs some version of that class. Only problem is, we are still only starting to write the curriculum. Sometimes we can work this fear out with a simple change of attitude. But sometimes it is more like a death and resurrection experience.

In the early church they used to talk about dying to our old selves, and putting on Christ, and being raised to a new and holy life! (Romans 6:3-5) Sometimes confronting our fear, our prejudice is a lot like dying in order to start a new life. “In Christ Jesus” says the apostle Paul, “you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

Sometimes to find the mind of Christ, we have got to put to rest our old ways of being and doing, thinking and reacting. Maybe that is scary. But on the other side of it is grace. On the other side of it is amazing resurrection! On the other side of it is a whole new world, in which love becomes the only Law, a love that unites rather than dividing, a love that reconciles rather than punishing, refusing to look down on folk or push them aside.

There isn’t an easy fix: but Christ offers us an invitation and a challenge. And the joy is worth the struggle. It doesn’t happen all in a day, this dying to our old fears and being raised to new love. It can take a long time, and painful discovery. But Jesus is walking with us. The Holy Spirit is taking care of us. And this church, fragile and fallen as we may be, is a great community, where other people also have been doing some hard work, death and resurrection work. It is possible to start over, possible to confront our fear and false hatred and prejudice. And when we have moments of doubt, moments of fresh fear, there is this amazing LOVE, this God-love that brings us back again.

Thanks be to God, for a world where saints and sinners are one and the same, where prosperous and poor can embrace one another and start to enrich each other. Thanks be to God for little communities where black and white and Latino and Asian, where gay and straight and those working out the question in fear and trembling can all be together. Thanks be to God for pockets of people that are committed to NOT look down on any one, but to receive every human being male and female, as a brother or sister. May Christ lead us to throw open the doors of this faith community, and welcome other pilgrims in. There is resurrection, there is love there is joy, in the meeting.