

DIGGING THE WELL

October 1, 2017

Matthew 21:23-27

²³ Then he was back in the Temple, teaching. The high priests and leaders of the people came up and demanded, "Show us your credentials. Who authorized you to teach here?"

²⁴⁻²⁵ Jesus responded, "First let me ask you a question. You answer my question and I'll answer yours. About the baptism of John—who authorized it: heaven or humans?"

²⁵⁻²⁷ They were on the spot and knew it. They pulled back into a huddle and whispered, "If we say 'heaven,' he'll ask us why we didn't believe him; if we say 'humans,' we're up against it with the people because they all hold John up as a prophet." They decided to concede that round to Jesus. "We don't know," they answered.

Jesus said, "Then neither will I answer your question.

The movie I saw this week was, "Brad's Status." Ben Stiller stars as a 47-year old father of a 17-year old music prodigy. The vast majority of the story takes place on their college interview trip to Boston. Troy, the son, has interviews at Harvard and also at his father's alma mater, Tufts University. As Troy is busy exploring his

future educational and social options, Brad is busy having a mid-life crisis.

Brad is obsessed with comparing his life and success with against four other men with whom he went to college. One is a famous author and commentator, frequently seen on television. One retired at age 40 with a fortune; he lives on Maui and lives the playboy life. The third is an entrepreneur, living a fast-paced corporate life, sporting his own private jet and his perfect wife and spoiled children. And the fourth man is a Hollywood director, well-known for his extravagances and his very public life.

Brad, on the other hand, lives a middle-class life with his wife and son. He works for a non-profit, and although his work is virtuous, his social and professional story pales in comparison to his contemporaries. He is well aware of how his choices have differed from theirs. He is well aware of his "status," a status that he rates well below that of his college buddies.

He learns along the way that there have been various social events involving these four college friends, events to which he was not invited. We learn that to each of the other four friends, his not being invited was less a function of ostracism than of irrelevance. Brad

simply does not fit in to the group anymore; he doesn't swing in the trees of the same social jungle any longer.

It brings to me the question today, as we kick off our Stewardship drive, about just what it takes these days to "belong?" How do we belong to our families, spread out geographically, philosophically, and politically as they are these days? How do we belong to our friends, some of which voted for the other candidate (to our total shock and dismay), some of whom have divorced recently, upsetting our tight little social group. Some have faded away, busy schedules, kid's sports, and different points of focus having gotten in the way of those long, lazy, fireplace and wine evenings we used to enjoy together.

How do we belong to our church, now that it is getting bigger with new seekers wandering in each week, now that the pastor is calling us to be more, to live a more committed life, to give more to the ministries we support outside the church, and to give to maintaining the church building and the various programs that all make up our faith community?

Maybe we want to run away. Maybe we don't want to confront the next family holiday now that Grandfather is gone. Maybe we don't want to receive the phone call from Robert who says he will not be

coming home from college this Fall Break, that he has plans for a road trip to South Padre Island this year. Maybe the thought of Thanksgiving Eve worship service is depressing, since we will be spending the holiday alone.

Maybe we don't want to hear the preacher exhort us to live a larger life. She demonstrates just how we have been living, with hands pulled in close to our chests, waiting for the next blow to strike us dead center. She wants us to open our arms wide and invite in all that the Spirit has to show us and tell us. We want to roll back over and pull the covers up over our heads.

But God keeps on talking us up, talking us into action, into community, and into Spirit-living. It's not fair that Jesus won't answer the Pharisees. It's not fair that God always wants more. It's not fair that Spirit is always bugging us to answer our doubts with more God, more Jesus, more church, and more hope.

Jesus loves in this passage to toy with the Pharisees. They are seeking firm answers rooted in scripture and practice, but Jesus is egging them on, calling on them to give more—more thought to their faith lives, more heart to their prayers, more resources to the poor, and more energy to all the God questions swirling around in their heads.

They want to see his credentials; they want proof of Jesus' authority to teach the people. They want to know his *status*. He wants commitment, extravagant welcome, and demonstrated compassion. Jesus is not about status; he is about *investment*—investment in the mission to get people radically connected to God and God's intention for the world.

The Pharisees want to trick him into blasphemy, either by his denouncing God or denouncing them. He wants them to drop their bottom line, their sensibilities, and their sense of righteousness. He wants them to open up their purses and give to the less fortunate of God's children. He wants them to open up their scriptures and read good news to the downtrodden. He wants them to take off their robe sashes and dance free like the whirling dervishes, drunk with Spirit-love and Spirit-calling.

The religious leaders are concerned with their *status*. How will the others judge them if they are too free, if they are too loving, too forgiving, too welcoming? They have appearances to keep up after all! It is expected of them; they can't possibly be seen as reckless with their faith! But Jesus? Jesus is not impressed by status—his or anyone else's. He is all about the journey; he is all about the

commitment. Jesus is all about the mission; he is all about building the kin-dom of God.

He won't answer their question, because they have not asked the right one. The Pharisees are asking him to clarify whether God or humans authorized John to be baptized, when what they *should* be asking is what *happened* to John when the Spirit of God came upon him. They want polity; he is all about transformation. They want specificity; he wants abandonment. They want to condemn; he wants to save by getting them to live outside themselves, for God.

It's that simple. Live for God and the rest takes care of itself. Invest in the mission and the vision and reap the benefits of the radical connection.

Just before this passage, Matthew tells us of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey to the excited applause of a large crowd. He heads right to the temple—the center of Jewish life, and there dramatically and angrily overturns the tables of the crooks, the money changers. The poor people, the lame people, and the children are thrilled with his bravery and his brashness. The Pharisees are not amused. Jesus is on a tear, and they want to know why—they demand accountability from him. It all makes sense, and they have every right to question him, don't they?

He is challenging their settledness. He is calling out their sensibilities and shaking up their sense of right and wrong. He is digging the well. It will be deeper, rounder, and more fruitful, bringing up cool, refreshing drops for all who seek to be sustained in faith. It will be God's well, a symbol of God's life-giving water.

Can we really blame the Pharisees in this story? I guess I have to question if I would be the same in the face of this one who, without any apparent authority, comes riding in and wants to upset everything I have set up so neatly the way it suits me just fine, thank you. What if we question, though, our own tendency to want to support the status quo? Can't we then put ourselves squarely in the shoes of the chief priests?

I mean, Jesus *always* is shaking things up. It's very *annoying!* He makes what is easy and known uneasy and questionable. His way is hard, because it is always changing. If I am truthful, I like games where I know the rules. I practice, I play by the rules, and I get good at the game. I don't like the lines scuffed out. I don't like the rules changing at someone else's whim. I don't like to be challenged and I will just quit the game when I don't see consistent rules enforced. It's just how I am.

Jesus always wants more. And he is always changing the rules of the game! Just when I think I am living right and following all the road signs and speed limits, Jesus comes along and turns all the signs upside down and puts his foot to the gas pedal of our lives. So why are we compelled to follow him, to declare him Christ?

Why do we study him, revere him, fear him a little bit, and keep coming back to him day after day, week after week, season after season? Jesus always wants more and I have only so much to give. And this is different from the resurrection question, isn't it? This is a call to live the Jesus here-and-now life, not the pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die-life. I don't know anything about that life. I don't concern myself with it.

The here-and-now well needs digging and the Water of Life is staring directly at me, wondering what I am going to do about it. I can't avoid his gaze. I am powerless to resist his call on my life. I must *invest* to save my life. It is *covenantal*. I give and God gives and we give as a whole and we get *life*.

We have a well that needs digging, and we have a children's program that is outgrowing its classroom. We suddenly have an influx of hungry teenagers who are here seeking connection and meaning, teens who are willing to come to church. That is a well that needs

digging! We have only so many pews, so many chairs and tables, so many parking spaces, so many teachers, and only so many resources pledged to handle all of these needs.

God is calling us to be something special in the world. What is God calling us specifically to do and to be? It's true that God is always calling for more—more faith, more action, and more of ourselves. We can be the Pharisees and stand with our arms folded across our chests, demanding to know the source of authority for the call to Stewardship, but really, who wants to be the Pharisee in the Gospel Story?

In the story that follows this one, Jesus tells the Pharisees of two sons, both of whom are asked by the father one day to go work in the vineyard. The first son answered, "No, I will not." The second son said he would go, but did not. After a time, the first son changed his mind and did what his father had asked of him.

We can turn our heads and expect somebody else to step up and fund this ministry, holding back and calculating like a miser our fair share and not one penny more. We can donate and let others do the work with our money. Or we can live into our vision and our mission and answer God's call with extravagant wonder that we have been tapped on the shoulder of faithful connection. We can open ourselves to transformation, or we can be satisfied with our rules, our restrictions,

and our same old ways, waiting for someone else to work the vineyard for the Father.

The first son, in changing his mind, was the blessed son, because when he sat and thought for a time about his father's will, he changed his mind and stepped up into his faith. He *invested*. Jesus holds him up as the son who did what God wants.

What is God asking of this church body? More. Undoubtedly so. Without apology, without blinking. I welcome you with open arms to this season of Discernment, the Season of Stewardship, the Season of Great Possibilities. God is good. Let's *invest* in God, as one body of faith, as UCC Parker Hilltop church.

May It Be So.