

Which am I? Which will you be? ¹

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
September 20, 2020
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

In an old city in ancient Japan there once lived a street worker, and a monk. They didn't know each other, yet each were deeply influenced by the other, their lives connected.² Every evening as the woman left her home on the way to earning a night's wage she passed the Buddhist temple where this monk lived. Every evening the young monk was seated outside in the temple garden doing meditation. As the woman passed by the temple she would see him meditating, and think, "What an amazing young man. What a noble life he is leading. Such a pure existence, not distracted by the concerns of this world!"

These thoughts sustained the young woman and gave her strength to endure her life. Just to know that someone was leading such this spiritual life gave her hope, even as she knew that that experience would never be hers. She felt blessed just walking by the temple.

Now the monk, although supposedly seated in deep meditation, couldn't help but notice the woman. Every evening as the young woman passed by the temple, the monk would become distracted thinking, "What an immoral woman. How could she make a living doing what she does? How low can a person go! Where is her self respect?! What a wasted life."

Which of those two am I? Which is you?

In the passages leading up to today's Gospel story, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, is at the Temple, and there in that holy place cleared out moneychangers. Now the religious leaders are challenging: "By whose authority do you do these things?"

A fair question. It's easy to judge those religious scholars for trying to corner Jesus, theologically. They wonder what his credentials are. Jesus, in good Rabbi fashion, resists answering simply; instead he answers with the parable of a father asking his two sons to work in the vineyard. One son is belligerent, really rude and says no, but ultimately he obeys. The other says he'll go, but doesn't in the end.

"Which of them followed the will of the father?" Jesus asks.

We need to grasp the mood of that moment, what are the feelings of those in authority as they are challenged by Jesus? What is like to answer a question to which you know the answer, but you don't want to hear it? ³

It is uneasy feeling when our values feel under siege. The instinct can be to dig in, to stand firm, defend. Have you ever felt like compelled to do that?

¹ I'm indebted to Rolf Jacobson's commentary (<http://www.workingpreacher.org> 17th after Pentecost, 2011) on Matthew 21: 23-34, for both the Message title and general idea of this Message.

² I found this ancient wisdom story at <https://www.evolutionarypathways.com/>.

³ Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, "Pastoral Perspective". *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* - Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

Jesus asks: “Which one am I in that parable? Which one are you?”

He calls us to re-evaluate our values, principles, beliefs. Not to change our views unthinkingly, but, I suggest, that moment when our tradition, our sense of authority is challenged, we might ask: *Is my faith in God’s power to transform me strong enough to overcome my fear of change?*

All institutions, all organizations, all of us undergo change. Some of our structures and habits sustain us, some, honestly, seemed ok at a time, but when scrutinized by the light of careful scrutiny, well, some structures and traditions need to go. At an individual level, an example for me was a day when I loved diner food, but I gained 15 pounds. I don’t eat diner food much anymore.

More complex are systems of power and privilege that we live in – movements like “Me Too” and “Black Lives Matter” have launched many of us into a some difficult, sometimes painful, personal reflection and uncomfortable conversations. We who enjoy particular privileges are confronted.

You know how it goes. We drag our feet as we say we will make changes, but don’t. But challenged and challenged, like a stone at the bottom of a brook, it changes.

September 30th is Orange Shirt Day, a day to remember indigenous children taken from their homes because the church and government of the day thought it was justified.

Today, we recognize the too many decades we spent as a nation dragging our collective feet along the long journey towards reconciliation. We have still not finished the work of making things right, restitution, and healing. We have stated that we value reconciliation, but we have not yet finished the work. Some around us, some of us, still are wrestling with stereotypes and myths about our First Nations sisters and brothers.

For all of us in our struggle, Jesus asks: Who will I be? Who will you be?

Our world presents many moral and ethical conundrums where the easier decision is the status quo. I invite you to take stock of your traditions and opinions that are buffeted by challenge. Consider in that reflection, your privilege. We all have it – some level of privilege. As I pass by St. Andrew’s here downtown and I see a person wheeling all their life’s belongings in a shopping cart – I am confronted. I recognize my privilege.

The question is, what habits of mine, and yours, can be transformed in a way that blesses the vulnerable, rather than preserving a privilege for a few? Our buying habits. Our politics. Our relationships. Which am I? Which will you be?

Today we wear orange to remember and honour all the Indigenous children who went to Residential Schools.

Today we wear orange and we pray for the Residential School and intergenerational survivors who are still struggling. Today we wear orange and we are thankful for those who speak the truth, and who work to shine a light on injustice.

Today we wear orange in the name of compassion and the spirit of truth and reconciliation. Help us, God, to remember and act on this every day. Amen.

**This prayer was inspired by Honarine Scott’s Orange Shirt Day blog.*