

A Calculated Faith
Matthew 21:23-32

It is a tough time to have an opinion these days. It's a difficult time to step out and share your point of view on any particular topic that is relevant to the culture of today. It makes me miss the days where we could argue about who was the better hitter in baseball. It makes me long for the days when you'd debate the greatest band or movie or artist of all time. You know, those arguments that you have over a beer or coffee about inconsequential things. Today, the arguments are constant, they are polarized and they are fierce. You see it online. You see it in person. You see it in protests and policies. It's hard to have an opinion nowadays and because of the consequences of having an opinion most people are afraid to speak up about what they truly believe. Now, this is nothing new to Christians. I think throughout the history of the Christian church we have dealt with that fear of stepping out and stating what we believe. Because a lot of the things that we believe are not popular. A lot of the things that we profess, confess, hold dearly will bring stares, confusion, frustration, calls of bigotry or hate speech. Being a Christian, standing up for your faith, is not a popular thing. It is much easier to be quiet, to give a non-answer, to shirk away from the responsibilities of speaking the truth of God boldly. We calculate the social cost and we decide it isn't worth it. So silently we reject the call to be witnesses in the world.

Well, today in our gospel reading we see that reality play out at the temple. We see people knowing the right answers, knowing what to say and not saying it for fear of what others may think or do. Jesus is teaching in the temple when the pharisees and chief priests approach Him and ask him a question. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" He responds by saying, "if you answer my question then I'll answer yours. That baptism of John, did it come from heaven or man?" He knows the people surrounding him revered John and felt he was a prophet. These religious elites are stuck. If we say it's from heaven then Jesus will challenge us on why we didn't believe John. If we say it is from man then the people will rebel. It is clear that these religious leaders know the right answer but they give a calculated response for fear of retribution. The question is turned around on them and they know the answer but they fear the animosity of the crowds. They don't step out and say what is right, what they know to be true. They don't profess the truth for fear of the reaction of people around them. Instead they shrug their shoulders and refuse to answer. Since the religious leaders refuse to answer, even though they know the truth, Jesus responds with a non answer as well. "Well then neither will I tell you with what I authority I do these things."

The first question that confronts and challenges us today is this: If we know the truth then why don't we say it? If we know the truth of scripture then why won't we preach it? If we know what is right based on the teachings of Christ, why do we shy away from it? You and I both know the answer because we've all fallen into those traps. There's a cost to speaking the truth. Sometimes it is a social cost. Other times it is an economic cost. I don't preach the truth because I'd rather have my friends. I don't preach the truth because I'd rather not offend. I don't preach the truth because it isn't politically correct. I don't preach the truth because it may cost me my job. I don't preach the truth because the world doesn't like the truth. I don't preach the truth because my classmates will make fun of me. I don't preach the truth because my coworkers will shun me. I don't preach the truth because I'm scared. I'm scared of the cost. I'm scared of what the fallout will be from me speaking the truth so I give calculated responses. I have a calculated faith that stands up when it's easy and shuts up when it starts to get difficult. That's what it is and for the temple leaders, the chief priests, the scribes they react the same way. They know the authority of John but they are afraid of the cost of their answer. They'll either be labeled as hypocrites or liars so they refuse to speak. In turn, Jesus doesn't give them the answer they are looking for.

If we know the truth then why don't we say it? If all the stories of scripture are true. If the whole counsel of God is the only truth that saves then what are we afraid of? I think that point alone is something we could cling to today. We should truly wrestle with where we've

been quiet. It's amazing how bold people can be when it comes to bashing each other online. It's amazing how strong we can be when we let our emotions get the best of us. It's amazing how we can use our opinions as a club to publicly smash our opponents. We can be so confident in that yet we suppress the only truth that matters. Search your life when you've done it because you've done it. We've been given so many opportunities to stand up for Christ but instead we'd rather stand and boldly profess our allegiances to the princes and powers of this world. What is that about? Are we speaking the truth when we are called to? Are we doing the work of our master, our savior or are we too scared? Opinions these days. Facts these days. Truths these days don't seem to matter and they seem to offend and so we back off. What do you think Jesus thinks when he sees our cowardice? What does He see when he sees our wishy washy answers, our lukewarm piety, our calculated faith? When we are called to give the truth we respond with excuses or non-answers. Then we get mad when we think we haven't heard an answer from God. It's incredible.

The good news for us today is that a parable follows this brief interaction in the temple. The good news is that we have a story that Jesus lays out for us that helps us see hope beyond our moments of denial and betrayal. He tells a story of two sons who are asked to do the work of their father. One says, "yep, I'll do it." Then he goes off and doesn't do anything. The other one says that he doesn't want to do it but then changes his mind and does the work after all. Which one did the work of his father? Another answer that is known. Jesus turns to these religious men and tells them an inconvenient truth. The tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom of God before you. Even when you knew the truth about John you didn't change your ways. Even though you know the truth about me your minds are made up. Meanwhile, these people who had lived a life of rejection and self-satisfaction now follow me with great joy. They've recognized their denial and they've turned toward Jesus. They've recognized the error of their ways and they've repented. They've all seen their sin and realized there is a better way.

We've all been the pharisees, confronted with a chance to profess our faith, a chance to speak the truth, a chance to stand up for Jesus and refused for fear of the cost. But what have we done after that moment? Initially these two brothers both lie to their father in this parable. I guess one lie would seem more significant than the other. One presents themselves as a true follower, a good son but doesn't do the work. The other who comes off as a rebellious son who rejects his father but recognizes that he was wrong. The pharisees knew the answer to Jesus' question. The son who turned around and listened to the father, that is the one who did the work of a true son. Even though his words were wrong at the beginning, his actions spoke louder than his infantile rejection. It's almost like Jesus is giving the pharisees another chance to answer his original question. It's almost like he's giving them a chance to rethink their position, to turn around and do the true work of the father. Have their actions lined up with their words? And if they haven't they have been told there is still time to reverse course. But they don't. Their faith has been calculated and they don't want to pay the price. The ones that do are the ones who recognize their need for the father. It's the ones who recognize that they belong to him. It's the ones that recognize that there is no other place that they'd like to be and nothing else they'd rather be doing than the work of their father.

There are two other brothers in scripture that mirror this parable in a significant way. Both are placed in a position where the work of their father is expected to be their priority. One says that he is doing the work but ends up not. The other denies the chance to be that worker but later turns from his ways. We must be bold witnesses for Christ. If we truly do believe that the stories of scripture are true then we can't be afraid. We can't be fearful. We often leave church like the first brother, one who says, "God I am ready to do your will" only to leave it at the threshold as we exit. When that time comes to be a true witness to the entire council of God we clam up. We become that second brother. But if we stay that way then we remain as the first. If we turn around and repent then we come like the second. The first brother collects coins, rationalizing it as money to further the ministry, only to betray the Son of God. The cost was calculated, 30 pieces of silver, and that was enough to do the unimaginable. The second brother is the one who is suddenly and uncharacteristically quiet as a fire crackles and glows

before him. The cost was his own life and he his fear got the best of him. As the rooster crowed he knew what he had done. Judas didn't repent and the results were deadly and desperate. His brother in this newly formed family of Christ, Peter, did. That repentance led to salvation and a life of service for his Heavenly Father. That repentance made him the Rock on which the church has been built.

We must follow the pattern of the second brother, of our brother Peter, because the Son of God is ready to welcome even the worst of us into his kingdom so long as we trust in his saving power to rescue us from our unbelief and misdeeds. Yes, we calculate the cost of speaking the truth. We often stay quiet, stay hidden, stay unnoticed when we could share the gospel. We are often numbered with the tax collectors and prostitutes. But there is always forgiveness waiting for us in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, if we turn and face him. As we see Him fulfilling his duties, as assigned by his Heavenly Father, on the cross we know there is a chance for us, even in our denial and sin. There are still more opportunities for us to speak boldly for our savior, the one who bore our sins so that we can be forgiven and free. We don't have to calculate the cost because we see what He paid. His entire life, body and blood broken and shed is the price He paid. In that truth we are free. In that truth we are secured and saved forever. Let's boldly profess that sacrifice in our most dangerous circumstances. Let's be bold confessors of that truth, the only truth that matters, in a world so consumed by other things. Let us step confidently out into the world to be truth tellers, not shying away from the tasks our Heavenly Father has for us. Because we know the answers when they ask. We know the truth when they question. We know what is right and just when the world pushes what is wrong and unjust. Shed your fears and follow Christ. Confess him at every chance so that the world may know his saving power. Amen.