

Secret Agents of the Secret Kingdom

Matthew 21:28-32, 43

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.' ²⁹He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

³¹Which 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. ³²For 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.

⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

In the cartoons, young Calvin and his imaginary tiger buddy Hobbes are walking along and Calvin is really starting to worry about Christmas. Calvin is sweating out this naughty or nice stuff about Santa Claus. He tells Hobbes, "This Santa Claus stuff bothers me... especially the judge and jury bit. Who appointed Santa Claus? How do we know he's impartial? What criteria does he use for determining good and bad? And what about extenuating circumstances? Kids should have the benefit of legal council, don't you think?" And Hobbes says, "You're worried about that Salamander incident aren't you?" Calvin throws up his arms, "Temporary insanity! That's all it was!"

In another episode, Calvin is listening to the radio and hears the familiar words, "He sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!" And Calvin reaches over and clicks off the radio, looks up at the reader and asks "Santa Claus: kindly old elf, or CIA spook?"

The next day little Calvin really starts to split hairs. He tells Hobbes, "They say that Santa knows if you've been good or bad, but what if someone had been sort of both? I mean, suppose some kid tried to be good at least, well, most of the time... but bad things inexplicably kept happening? Suppose some kid just had terrible luck and he just got blamed for a lot of things he did only sort of on purpose?" And with an enormous grin Hobbes turns to him and says, "And who exactly might we be talking about?" And Calvin retorts, "This is an entirely hypothetical case, Mr. Smartypants!"

Hey, kids! Do you worry about these things? I confess I used to sweat that ability Santa had to look upon what I had done and judge me worthy or unworthy of receiving presents. I mean, the track record of my little life was there for all to see, as best as I could tell. But who is it that looks upon my heart and judges what it is I hold there? I'm glad I didn't worry about that because, in my young fallen state, I had my heart wasn't very pure either.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is clearly challenging the priests and city elders

to have authority in matters relating to God. He's challenging their worthiness to be judge and jury in matters of religious practice – and they, in turn, challenge Jesus. On the day before this incident – this conversation with elders and priests in the temple – Jesus boldly, brazenly challenged the religious and political authorities by riding a donkey into the crowded capital of his nation in the very way the promised king was supposed to come. The police and the politicians are very nervous. His noisy and disorderly street demonstration proceeded to the Temple, the very symbol of religious authority, where, of all things, he dismounted, strode right into the outer court where the Temple vendors had set up shop, selling animals to religious pilgrims for sacrifice and with his entourage looking on, some probably urging him on, others – more perhaps, getting nervous – Jesus starts overturning the tables and ripping down the flimsy material that divides the stalls and physically assaulting the vendors. It's quite a gesture. It's an out-and-out challenge to the religious authorities.

So the very next day when he returned to the scene – they were waiting for him: chief priests, elders of the people; the clergy and the Board of Trustees. They're good men. They believe in what they're doing. They believe in the authority of their religion, its sacred rituals. They believe in the authority of their own office. They regard a challenge to their authority as a challenge to their very way of life. And they're stunned and angry at the presumptuousness of this young man from Nazareth. And so they ask a very natural question, "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?"

Gracia Grindal, who teaches at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, serves on many committees that evaluate students' suitability as candidates for professional ministry, and she wonders how Jesus would do in front of a credentialing committee. She imagines the committee report saying:

"The candidate seems to have trouble with authority. We recommend that he be sent to a counselor to work on these issues before he goes any further in the process. There are repeated instances of this problem in his history. He is known to have been impertinent to his elders as far back as age 12, when he argued a fine theological point with them in the temple, without any consideration for the feelings of his parents. It doesn't appear that he has dealt with that issue yet. The Clinical Pastoral Education report also hints at the same problem. We recommend that he take an internship. Furthermore, he has anger issues – which he needs to deal with. It is reported that he entered a church and threw out the people selling souvenirs and candles."ⁱ

So the priests demand "Who gave you the authority?" It's at this point that Jesus brings up this simple story about two sons. "Tell me what you think of this story. A man had two sons and he had work that needed to be done. He expected them to work. He tells the first son "Go to the vineyard today and get to work."

And this son says “I will Not!” But later on he changes his mind and goes and works. The father goes to the second son and tell him the same thing “You’re needed down in the vineyard. Get busy and start working.” And this son says, “Yes sir! Right away!” but he gets distracted - or something - and never shows.

So Jesus asks the Priests, “Tell me. Which of the two did the will of their father?” It’s clear to the Priests: “The first son! The one who actually did work.” And then Jesus unveiled his little lesson: “Yes, and I tell you that crooks and whores are going to get into God’s kingdom before you. John came to you showing you the right road. You turned up your noses at him, but the crooks and whores believed him. Even when you saw their changed lives, you didn’t care enough to change and believe him.”ⁱⁱ

Now, why does Jesus say this? Because he’s telling the Priests, and the Scribes, and the Pharisees that they promised God to do God’s work, but like the second son they didn’t get around to it. But it’s all those people who first thumbed their noses at God, who changed their minds, changed their hearts, and got down to the loving business of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is telling them that it’s like there’s a swarm of people right under their noses who are working in God’s vineyard – and the Temple authorities haven’t even noticed. Time and again, it’s like Jesus is telling people that this world is being invaded by advance agents of God’s kingdom. They are all around us. They are the people who have had their hearts and minds changed by God’s love and are putting that love into action.

God’s secret agents are simply those who go out and do God’s will. It’s “ground-level theology.” Are you acting in a loving and compassionate way? Are you controlling your temper, your impatience, your judgementalism? Are you finding ways to help those around you? Are you looking for ways to do works of mercy, work for justice, and walk with God in humility? Are you actually doing these things? Not slicing and dicing motivations like little cartoon-Calvin who’s always trying to find a loophole. Not cloaking yourself in righteousness like the Pharisees. Not sitting in the cafes and talking a good theological game. Are you merciful, loving, just, and humble? The people who do these things don’t care for recognition – they are like secret agents of God’s kingdom.

Now, I don’t know about you but a little fear and trepidation start to boil up in me when I read this simple story. I mean, I’ve got lots of good intentions, don’t you? I fully intend to get down to the vineyard and do my part. We all do. But evidently good intentions don’t count for squat in God’s kingdom. It all comes down to what you do. It’s like Yoda says in *Star Wars*, right? He says, “Do or Do Not – There is no ‘try.’”

So here’s the surprise – the Kingdom of God isn’t about talking a good game. It’s about how we actually live. This past week, Governor Rod

Blagojevich, ex-Governor Blagojevich, of Illinois was convicted and removed from office three days ago by a unanimous 59 - 0 vote in the Illinois State Senate. What amazed me was that, while he refused to testify or participate in the proceedings, he sure talked a good game trying to use the media to make his case with the public. He talked up a storm. In a very earnest manner, he declared that he was innocent of all wrong doing, that he did nothing illegal, that he deserved another chance, that there was no evidence.

He talked a great game. But when the prosecution played back the audio tapes of Blagojevich demanding campaign contributions in exchange for future favors, and audio tapes were played of Blagojevich clearly attempting to “sell” the vacant Senate seat of Barack Obama, it was difficult to hear Blagojevich’s plea of innocence. Do you think God is pleased with someone like ex-governor Blagojevich who talks a good game but doesn’t “walk the walk”?

Christ’s secret message, which the priests and others could not hear, is that the Kingdom of God is very different that what they had thought. God’s Kingdom is not sitting in the Temple precincts debating Torah. It’s not about the righteousness of keeping religious law purely and well. God’s Kingdom is not about getting to some spiritual roof-garden as if this life doesn’t count for much. The Kingdom is our daily life, not our eventual life.

In truth, God’s kingdom is even much more than a correct belief system. You can have great head knowledge without it ever touching your heart. God’s kingdom is about whether you are living under the God’s dominion here and now. Way back in the previous millennium, in the 1960's when I was growing up, people used to ask “If being a Christian were a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Does the way you live, what you do, how you use your resources, what you care most passionately about – would it show something of your faith?

How are you and I living as children of God? Are we saying “Yes!” with our mouths, but somehow never find our way into the fray of actually living for Christ under the dominion of God? Because what Jesus is telling us today is that there are plenty of people outside of these walls, who may, at first, have scorned God. But through God’s loving spirit, they’re going to change their minds and become unsuspected agents of God’s kingdom.

Faith begins, authoritative faith, when you and I hear the call of Christ to come, follow, go into the world, serve, love, laugh, rejoice, give your life away in some improbably adventure – tutor a child, embrace a homeless man, help with a food distribution, empty your pockets, lose your very life.

Barbara Lundblad, now a professor of Homiletics at Union Theological Seminary, tells of a phone call she received from a former student who was serving an inner city parish. Professor Lundblad asked her how their building renewal project was going. “Great!” said the student. “But we ran out of money before we

could refurbish the sanctuary.” Lundblad says she bristled a little at this. Naturally, she considers worship to be the first priority of the church. She was wondering what type of pastor her student had turned out to be.

“But,” her old student said, “we had enough to remodel the basement where we have the homeless shelter so we could put in some new beds and get a better kitchen and clean up the place for our guests.”

In fact, the former student said, they had just dedicated the basement by gathering in their old run down sanctuary to praise and pray and hear the Word of God. The student enthusiastically said the scripture was “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”ⁱⁱⁱ Then they took the bread and the communion chalice and went down to the basement and broke the bread over the new beds and shared the cup in the new kitchen. That night the beds were full and the sanctuary still needed work. And Christ was fed and welcomed and clothed and sheltered by his church. Said Lundblad, “May it always be so among us.”

Barb was stunned. It turns out that this pastor was a sort of secret agent in God’s kingdom – doing the loving, good, sacrificial thing Christ would have us do. It was right there in front of her eyes, and she hadn’t suspected it. The spiritual journey we are on leads us to do foolish things in the eyes of the world.

This morning, we come to this Table to receive grace, but we carry the grace with us when we leave that we might offer it to others, so that they might enter the Kingdom of God. So I invite you, come to the table today. Be fed. Be made well. Be filled with God’s Shalom. Then go out as an agent of God in the name of the Lord, and join the journey of the Spirit that leads to life.

iThe Christian Century, 9/11/2002
iiTranslation from *The Message*, Eugene Peterson.
iiiMatt 25:35-36