

Sermon by Christopher D. Girata

Matthew 21:23-32
(Proper 21 – Year A)
28 September 2008

Legend has it that a man was lost in the desert, just dying for a drink of water. He stumbled upon an old shack – a windowless, roofless, weather-beaten old shack. He looked around the place and found very little shade from the heat of the sun. As he glanced around the room, he saw an old, rusty water pump just a few feet away. He stumbled quickly over to the pump, grabbed the handle, and began to pump up and down, up and down. Nothing came out.

Disappointed, he staggered back, only to notice an old jug off to the side. He looked at the jug, wiped away the dirt and dust, and read a message written on the side that said, “Dear friend: You have to prime the pump with all the water in this jug. P.S.: Be sure you fill the jug again before you leave.”

He popped the cork out of the jug and, sure enough, the jug was full of water. Suddenly he was faced with a decision. If he drank the old water in the jug, he would certainly live. But if he poured all the water into the old rusty pump, maybe the pump would deliver fresh, cool water from down deep in the well – all the water he’d want! He considered both options. Should he take a chance to turn this old stale water into new, fresh water, or should he drink the guaranteed water in the old jug? Should he put his life on the line to follow the friendly note, written who knows when?

Finally, and reluctantly, he poured all the water into the pump. Then he grabbed the handle and began to pump it, squeak, squeak, squeak. Still nothing came out! Squeak, squeak, squeak. A little began to dribble out, then a small stream, and finally the water gushed from the pump. Out came fresh, cool water – as much as he could drink! Eagerly he filled the jug and drank until he couldn’t drink any more.

He filled the jug one last time for the next traveler. Putting the cork back in, he added this to the jug’s note: “Believe me, it really works. You have to give it all away before you can get anything back.”*

In today's lesson, Jesus addresses a very critical question: What do we get if we believe in and follow him?

Our gospel story answers that question – we get to enter the kingdom of God, and Jesus tells us how to do just that. At first, Jesus overturns the status quo, outsmarting the attempt by the chief priests to undermine his growing authority with the people. Then Jesus shocks the chief priests, saying, "...the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." But why, we might ask, would Jesus make the claim that the lowest of the low – tax collectors and prostitutes – would enter the kingdom of God before the pious priests? To answer that question, Jesus points to the single greatest truth of the Gospel: because they believe.

Belief is integral to the Christian life – this scripture makes that clear. Yet Jesus points to the complexity of belief in the story that precedes this section. In that story, Jesus praises the son who, though he first refused to work, later decided to do so. Jesus praises that son above the son who first agreed to work but never acted. Jesus is emphasizing the value of acts over words, a quality that illuminates the judgment he makes about the high priests. Belief is only true – belief is only salvation – if that belief produces faithful action.

Early followers of Jesus coined a unique name for their movement: The Way. Early Christians knew that in order to follow Jesus completely, they began and remained on a journey through their entire lives. Their journey began with strong belief, but continued with intentional action. They knew the way to salvation. The Way was through a life lived with right belief and right action – one was not above the other. Both are necessary to live out Christ's new covenant.

Anyone remember Dumbo? (The flying elephant, that is.) The story of Dumbo is one of my favorite children's stories. I imagine you all know the story very well, just like I do. Dumbo was a little circus elephant with big ears. He was ridiculed for those ears, so much so that he became the clown of the circus. Poor Dumbo's only friend was the little mouse, Timothy.

After a number of misadventures, Dumbo and Timothy accidentally drink from a trough of water in which the clowns have spilled a bottle of beer. Both Dumbo and Timothy get drunk from the beer and wake up the next morning in a tree, of all places. Only after they fall out of the tree does Timothy realize how they got in the tree in the first place – Dumbo must have flown! Timothy tries over and over again to convince Dumbo that he can fly, but it is only after Timothy presents Dumbo with a "magic feather" that Dumbo finally believes he might be able to fly.

Armed with the magic feather, Dumbo is able to fly with ease. The real test, however, comes during a dangerous stunt when Dumbo loses his feather. As Dumbo and Timothy hurdle toward the ground, out of control, Timothy tries to convince Dumbo that he can fly without the feather – that the feather isn't really magic at all! At the last second, just before the two crash into the ground, Dumbo finally risks believing without the feather – and he flies! Dumbo soars over the heads of the audience, and all because he risked changing his mind – he risked believing. His belief enabled his action, and without both, he would never have flown!

Our lives are often filled with the ups and downs that make believing difficult, and true, believing is risky. But belief is the cornerstone of living our lives with God. Only through belief are we able to, “confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” That confession, that singular statement of faith, combines both belief and action. Being together tonight, hearing the words of scripture and sharing in the sacraments strengthens us for our own journeys. As we leave tonight, we will be filled with the real faith that lies inside each one of us, faith that will not only sustain us, but will overflow in love to all those we meet along the way of our own Christian journey.

Amen.

* Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll.