

MAR 23, 2025

Marion weekly update

SERMON March 16 - "Reborn or Crucified?" Matthew 21:28-45

This week we are tackling two parables. They fit well together, are back to back, and their timing in the story of Jesus matters. Jesus is in the final week of His life. The crucifixion is approaching. A story about a dutiful Son has a lot of punch here. A story about the Son being killed by those entrusted with the work of the Master has a lot of punch as well. And the rewards and consequences depending on how the Master is heard and the Son treated have increased urgency.

The first parable is about words and deeds. The father asks two sons to do work for him. One son says what any parent doesn't want to hear. "I'll do it later". We typically want it done now. Nevertheless, this son though the words aren't perfect does in fact perform the work requested. The other son gives good lip service. "I'll get right to it." He does nothing.

Which did what was asked? The one who actually ponied up the work.

This is a stark message to religious folks who have great spiritual wording yet little in the way of spiritual doing. Those who sound holy with their mouth but are far from the Spirit of God in their hearts. Jesus lets them know that it's not outward appearance and what one can convince another of that makes the difference. It is in repentance and right action. In this way those that were disregarded and disrespected but have heeded the message of repentance and transformation of heart and life are way ahead of those who have nothing more than head knowledge and public appearance but nothing of substance in their hearts, values, and deeds.

"The tax collectors and prostitutes are further ahead and entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you." It's important for us to keep in mind that back then it was the religious Jews being spoken to. Today it would be us, the church going folks who have the stories, the language, and the statements of faith. Are we more like the pious but lost people back then, or more like the prostitute whose life was truly changed because of the message of Jesus?

The second parable is harsher. In the first it was about who is truly in the will of God. The next is a not at all veiled illustration of something Jesus has said repeatedly.

A landowner has tenants working that land. When it comes time for his due the owner sends servants who are abused, mistreated, and shamed. Thinking that certainly his son would receive better treatment, the son is sent. The tenants abuse and even kill the son, then thinking they will get what was promised the son in inheritance now that he is gone.

The land owner is clear. They will receive nothing but punishment. The one who will receive reward is the one who rightly brings the fruit intended to be produced.

Over and over we've heard Jesus say that the prophets were sent, and they were beaten and killed. Now the Son has come and people will kill Him because they don't want to hear the message. The ones who will inherit the Kingdom are the ones who bear the fruit of the Kingdom.

In different terms, today we have a choice. We are either participating with the ones who crucified Jesus or the ones who truly followed Him. Make no mistake, both sets claim to be following God. It is the ones who are actually living as Jesus instructed that will be reconciled. The others, no matter what they say or try to impart, are crucifying Jesus just as they did thousands of years ago. What is so tragic is that it is being done in Jesus' own name.

Those who are living as Jesus calls them to are birthing Jesus into the world every single day. Just as on that first Christmas, Jesus is being born into the world anew every time a believer not only claims Him, but authentically represents Him to the world in both word AND deed.

I want to consider something this morning that we have to address in our current day. It is one of the most essential keys to truly following Jesus, and without it I fear we have little hope of doing so.

The term is empathy, and it is a present buzz word. There are people of faith that have embraced the idea that part of our culture has that empathy is a bad thing. Some pastors have recently even called empathy a sin.

This is a problem.

Empathy is putting ourselves in another's situation, feeling what they feel. Biblical empathy is to have this for every person without condition. We'll see, as we frequently have, that Jesus' calls for empathy are like His calls to serve those in need. We are to serve whomever requires it with it. There is another kind of empathy, however, that is actually at odds with Biblical empathy.

Parochial empathy is what many who would speak against a more Biblical empathy embrace. Parochial empathy is to feel what another is feeling, so long as they are like me. I can put myself in the shoes of others that are in my self-designed circle, but not those outside the circle.

The problem is that this kind of empathy feels for those like me, and is at the expense and sadly often the damage of those not like me. It becomes easier to dehumanize others and put responsibility for those negative things I and those like me feel, and that becomes the excuse for mistreatment.

There is a reason this parochial rather than Biblical empathy is attractive for some.

If a faith or cultural movement thrives on division, judgmentalism, and pitting one against another as a stark enemy, empathy gets in the way of all of that. Empathy is a true connecting force rather than a dividing one.

To feel what another feels is to invoke and elicit compassion and understanding. Even in disagreement, compassion and understanding move us to connection and humanizing each other. It's very hard to hate, try to beat down, or totally disregard someone with whom we can connect.

It is the very heart of hearing another's story, and even if we don't condone choices, values, or behaviors, we can say with honesty "I may not agree, but were I to have gone through the same things I can't say I wouldn't be in the same spot."

Empathy is the destruction of any faith or tradition that looks to hold hard and fast lines to keep people out. Because empathy draws us in and together.

If we are striving to live lives that are truly good, we do well to remember the words of Gustav Gilbert who was a psychologist for the US Army observing the Nuremberg trials after WW 2. Many of you may have seen this floating around recently.

"In my work with the defendants (at the Nuremberg Trials 1945-1949) I was searching for the nature of evil and I now think I have come close to defining it. A lack of empathy. It's the one characteristic that connects all the defendants, a genuine incapacity to feel with their fellow men.

Evil, I think, is the absence of empathy."

-Captain G. M. Gilbert, the Army psychologist

This makes sense given two simple realities of Jesus Himself. Jesus calls us to the Golden Rule. "Do to others as you'd have them do to you." This is the rule of rules for how to honor Jesus in our treatment of one another. To give perspective about where we're at, this week I literally heard the vice president of a major evangelical university say the rule is "do to others as they do to you". He argued it was about giving what you get, which is the equivalent of eye for eye and tooth for tooth, which Jesus Himself vehemently reversed. In order to follow it, we first have to ask "how would I like to be treated if I were in that situation and felt as this person does?" THIS is empathy. Without it we can not follow the Golden Rule with any consistency or reliability.

The other circumstance determines, very literally, our salvation.

Romans and Hebrews tell us that Jesus intercedes with God on our behalf. It is through his crucifixion and resurrection. One of the common theological arguments of why Jesus is truly the qualified intercessor for us is that He has done what God, who is fully Spirit, can not. As an intercessor He passionately pleads with the Father on our behalf for that mercy He died to bring us. Because He walked in flesh and blood, Jesus can relate to our struggles fully. He knows what it is to be tempted, to have desires and urges, and to have to fight them daily. He can argue on our behalf because He understands.

What is this called? That Jesus can place Himself in our shoes and understand the predicament we are in on a genuine heart level, not just intellect? It is empathy.

Jesus' empathy for us is what compelled Him to the cross to secure our redemption.

For those who claim this for Jesus as intercessor, yet deny the necessity and beauty of empathy, a lot of work needs to be done. These two views are at significant odds with each other.

We are called to be like Jesus. We are called to empathy for one another. In the compassion this brings about we birth Jesus into the world in our own hearts and lives. We live in love and grace with those around us, counter to callousness and contrived division.

When we hear the excuses for not extending compassion or avoiding empathy, all we need to do is remember and maybe even recite the words of Jesus Himself.

Why do you want to feed the hungry? Clothe the naked? Care for the sick? Spend time with people who are criminals? Stand alongside the people who we want to put down or put out? Forgive these people who have done X, Y, or Z?

Because Jesus said to. He said to meet the needs of those in need and visit those in prison in Matthew. He said he came to give liberty to the oppressed in Luke. He tells us that if we want to be forgiven we need to forgive.

When the response comes “but what about...?”

“I didn’t see anywhere that Jesus told us to make exceptions.”

When a new face enters any aspect of our church life. Someone comes to worship, karate, Bible study, game night, a community meal, or some other event how do I react? Do I joyfully go to greet them or ask “who is that?” with suspicion? Were I that person, how would I like to be greeted? That’s the question with the answer we go with.

What about more significant situations? When we come across the homeless, the addict, someone in the midst of an ugly divorce, someone in great fear for their well being, and on and on? Do we go with our assumptions about why we think they are in their predicament, or do we listen to earnestly understand what they are going through? If we do, do we put ourselves in their shoes? Do we allow ourselves to be moved to compassion?

There is a great beauty in empathy. It doesn’t mean agreement or condoning. It does mean connection and breaks down barriers to walking with one another even through the ugly spots in life.

When we look at the parable of the sons, the obedient son is the one of follows the instructions of Christ. That requires empathy.

The ones who would bear fruit in the second parable and birth Jesus anew into the world rather than crucify Him in His own name are the ones who live like Jesus lived. Empathy is a large part of that life.

One of the great deficits in the world today is genuine human connection. This is what following Jesus, living with empathy offers to us. We live into selflessly feeling for and with each other. This means the good and the bad, the happy and sad. In all of it we are intimately connected because no matter who we come across we care. Genuinely care.

The satisfaction of heart and mind that comes from daily building others up because we feel their need is like nothing else in the world. The peace of heart and mind that comes from daily connecting to others over buying into the false divisions around us makes for good sleep and the ability to say in honesty “It is well with my soul.”

If we truly believe that everyone is a child and creation of God, and that we are invited by Jesus to be one big family then one of the cosmic purposes of life is to work to bring us all together. It begins with feeling and giving the love of Jesus. That love, if we truly have it, brings about an empathetic heart that leads to the same kind of radical compassion we wish form from others being given freely to everyone in our lives.

“Do unto others...” Every day be the one who through word and deed births Jesus once again, fresh and anew, into a world that needs Him as much as ever.

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 14

In Chapter 14 David continues to sadly demonstrate that he is abandoning his role as a father reconciling with his child. He is coldly acting as a king. The result continues to be the destruction of his family. Not being a father when Amnon raped Tamar led to Absalom murdering his brother. Now as he chooses to keep Absalom at a distance, Absalom's anger grows and David's throne is in jeopardy.

It is here that we see why Joab may have enlisted the help of the wise woman to snap David to his senses and bring Absalom home. There is some kind of deficit in David's rendering judgements in critical cases of the people. It doesn't tell us if it's poor judgment or just a general absenteeism. That Absalom sees and uses an opportunity to use rendering justice as a means of getting the people on his side indicates that somewhere the king has fallen down on this part of his job.

For a span of years he waits as people come seeking judgments and speaks to them. "If only I were given the job to judge everything would be just wonderful." We know he is handsome. Apparently he is also charming and persuasive. When he greets people he does so with a show of humility and grace towards them. Slowly he erodes David's name and wins the hearts of enough people to think he can stage a coup.

When he feels it's time he asks to go to Hebron to fulfill a vow to God. How can David say no? If David is a man of God as he seems to be honoring a vow takes precedent. He agrees.

Hebron is not some random choice. It is where Absalom was born. It is the capital of Judah. It is a place where there is a great shrine to God. Perhaps most symbolically it is where David was proclaimed by the people king over Judah and all of Israel. It is a significant place for Absalom to announce that he, not David is now king.

Apparently word went out to Israel that this was going to happen. At his command people would shout his kingship. In all of this we see an important lesson in attentiveness.

Somehow this word had gone out without David knowing. Absalom had been snaking people's affection out from under him for years. David is unaware of what is happening in both his family and his kingdom. There is a double problem here.

The first and main one is David's inattention. The other is that, at least according to what we've read, no one has given David a heads up that everything was slipping away. When something is going wrong, to keep the king, or leader, in the dark is to be complicit in whatever demise comes. Joab told David to bring Absalom back which was wise and good. Where was he the last four years as the people were being persuaded away from the king and David's relationship with Absalom continuing to deteriorate?

From Jerusalem Absalom takes two hundred of his friends to Hebron, but they are clueless as to what is about to happen. This reminds us how secretive Absalom has been. Word has gone outside Jerusalem but not through Jerusalem. Even his own friends don't know his plan. Why?

Absalom needs some kind of support from Jerusalem. It might be difficult to convince even his friends in the city where the king resides. Word would almost certainly get back to David. Bringing them to Hebron in the middle of an entire city proclaiming Absalom king puts those friends in a bad place. Will they really speak out against the man the entire city is hailing as king? Doubtful. It is a means to force support from a Jerusalem contingent.

Absalom also is smart enough to grab David's trusted advisor Ahithophel. This is not just a slap in his father's face. It also deprives him of counsel, giving Absalom a strategic benefit.

When this all comes to pass the light bulb goes on for David. He sees this rebellion for what it is and realizes that Absalom has amassed enough support to be a legitimate threat. He is on the way to Jerusalem and David won't be able to win the coming fight. So he runs.

David's contingent running with him is telling to how much he has slipped. It is his family and non-Israelites. The fighting men are all from foreign nations. His officials are the only Israelites from Jerusalem noted. Apparently David has managed to alienate more than a few people.

Yet in this crisis we see something happen to David.

As David runs one of the foreign soldiers named Ittai is among them. He and his men have recently

come to Jerusalem. David extends great grace to him and asks Ittai to take his men and go back. They have just arrived and being back out in the wilderness so soon, especially under these circumstances, doesn't seem fair.

In a pledge echoing the devotion of Ruth to Naomi (another foreigner to an Israelite) Ittai refuses pledging that he and his men will follow David wherever even if it means death.

The ark is being brought by two priests, Zadok and Abiathar, and their sons. Something overcomes David. We've seen that while the ark is a symbol of Israel's faith in God, its presence doesn't guarantee victory. Rather it is the faith of the people that brings God's favor. Carrying it would slow them down. David has seen what carelessness in caring for the ark can bring when they returned it to Israel and a priest was struck dead or steadying it when it looked as if it might fall.

David's remarks show that rather than relying on a symbol, he will rely on God. If God desires him to see the ark again he will, if not, so be it. David is returning to a humble and steadfast reliance on God. Whatever ease may have distracted him in the palace is gone. Now on the run he falls back into the arms of the God that watched over him as he fled from Saul.

Not only an act of his faith, David's shrewd military strategic mind seems to have returned. Sending the ark back provides him with another opportunity. He trusts the priests and their sons. Returning the ark gives a great pretext for them to go into Absalom's newly established "court". David commissions them as spies and asks them to use their sons to report back to him.

Continuing this plan he enlists Hushai, a friend they run into on their way out of the city. Hushai wants to flee with David but David won't have it. Instead he asks him to go back to the city and ingratiate himself to Absalom. Why? Ahithophel has the new "king's" ear. David wants Hushai to provide a counter voice to mess up the advice Ahithophel might give to Absalom. Working in cahoots with Zadok and Abiathar Hushai will be David's eyes and ears in the city and report back to him vital information to help him as he figures out what to do next.

Finally, the prayer David offers is telling as well. It isn't flowery anymore. When he became king we noticed that his addressing God changed in tone and vocabulary to be more "kingly". Here it is simple and straightforward. "Make Ahithophel's advice foolish." That's it. No pretense. Just an honest request that acknowledges the need at hand and asking for help.

It seems that this crisis is doing something to bring the old David back. Faithful. Gracious to his men. Simple. Decisive. Strategic. Having to once again deal with a life that has turned harsh we see those traits that made David so popular once upon a time start to return.

This chapter is a lesson on both sides of the same coin.

David allowed guilt and the ease of kingly living to lead him down a road of bad choices. Bathsheba and Uriah. Refusing to deal with his family problems. Alienating his son Absalom. All of this is a lesson that power and wealth don't mean a sound and faithful heart. In fact those trappings can make for a situation where it's all the easier to move away from God and our good senses.

On the other hand crisis isn't always the worst thing. Sometimes hard times force the best parts of us to surface or to be renewed. The question is whether or not we allow this to occur. David could have sulked and rolled over allowing Absalom to run roughshod. He didn't. Instead he tapped into those parts of him that kept him tethered to God and the people many years ago.

We'd all love to make perfect choices and for life to go with ease and without hiccups along the way. This isn't ever the case. Sometimes problems are of our own making, others they happen outside of our influence. Whichever may be, we have the chance to learn from the problems that occur. We have an opportunity to grow and become better in our faith, our relationships, and our lives. In good times and bad, the call and opportunity to honor God and one another is there and at the very least can bring us peace of mind and spirit even in the hardest of times.