

Changing the Minds of God's Difficult People

Exodus 17: 1-7

Matthew 21: 23-32

God is always trying to teach his people the lessons of faith, forgiveness, grace, and peace, but as scripture reveals, God's efforts aren't always successful. Blessedly, God keeps trying. Clearly, God's people have their own preferred modes of doing things and thinking about things. Like old dogs, it's hard to teach us new tricks.

A couple of grandparents were trying to expose their 4 year old grandson to prayer, teaching him to share and converse with God. He had been very observant when they prayed together, soaking things up like children do.

One evening as they sat at the dinner table, the time came to say grace. Their grandson announced that he wanted to say the blessing. The grandparents were pleasantly surprised by his initiative and told him to go ahead. So they held hands, and the grandparents waited. They couldn't hear anything discernible, just some quiet sounds from their grandson, until he finished with loud and clear, "Amen."

The child was very pleased with himself, but the grandparents weren't too sure what had just happened. The grandmother told the boy that they would need to pray again since she didn't understand a word of what the boy had said in his prayer before. The boy's puzzled face showed his surprise at her remark. He turned to his grandmother and said, "But granny, I wasn't talking to you; I was talking with God."

You do sympathize with the grandparents, of course. When prayers are being said and conversations are taking place, it would be very helpful to know what's going on. One of the things that happens repeatedly in the Exodus story is the apparently private conversation between God and Moses. The rest of the people of God learn about the outcome of their conversations, but they're rarely first hand participants. Including them in the conversation could have gone a long way to making them less abrasive and truculent.

As we learn in today's scripture reading, they're still wandering in the wilderness. Last week, we learned how belligerent and ugly they could become when their food supplies ran down. They complained that God had brought them out in the desert to die, that they were fat and happy when they were in Egypt and could eat all they wanted (probably a big exaggeration, if not an outright lie). God responded by showering them with manna in the morning, and providing quail in the evening. That would seem to have settled it, right?

Surely God's people have learned now that God will graciously bless them and care for them, having made the way for their departure from Egypt, their safety from the pursuing Egyptian army, and then provided food for them when they hungered. The lesson seems obvious to us; God will provide for your needs. All you need to do is ask.

Well, not so easy. In Exodus 17, as the camp at Rephidim, there is no water there. They confronted Moses and, with a high level of hostility, demanded that he provide them with water. Moses was taken aback by the intensity of their demand, asking where that came from, and why were they making demands of God, testing God's patience?

Typically we focus on the uncalled-for (in our view) bitterness of the Israelites, but we don't usually notice one other thing. Moses is first taken aback by their hostility toward him, but then adds the second question of these angry people: *Why do you put the Lord to the test?* It is not, 'why don't you address the Lord nicely?' It is, 'why are you testing the Lord, making demands upon the Lord.' If you listen carefully, you'll hear that Moses is intimidated, having to make a request of God on behalf of the people. The people are demanding that God perform another miracle, this time providing water. Moses doesn't want to bring that petition to God under any terms. That's testing the patience of God, and Moses is worried, not only about these people, but how God may treat him when this demand is presented. Moses is a bit weak-kneed here on both fronts.

The people revert again to their now familiar complaint about being taken out into the desert to die – of thirst this time. It's a silly and stupid remark to make, as we noted last week. God could have let them die on a bunch of previous occasions. They love to be dramatic, as we all can be at times, but it certainly isn't helpful.

Frankly, it doesn't seem like Moses really knows what's going to happen when he brings this matter to God's attention. He really doesn't want to find out either. It seems like he would much prefer that the people shut, be thirsty, but don't rock the boat. You see, I don't think Moses is quite convinced about who God is and what God will do for his people, even now, even after all they've been through.

Therefore, Moses comes to God, expressing his frustration as if he understood the same feeling would be shared by God. Moses says, *What am I going to do with these people?* Moses feels they are his problem, but it's a problem God brought him, and God ought to help him out.

Moses adds, *They're almost ready to stone me.* Again a bit of overdone drama to make the point, not exactly necessary, and not what we were just told about the Israelites and their expression of their complaint; they were not ready to stone him.

God realizes that it's lesson time again, and even Moses needs to be taught again. But he needs support and these elders of Israel can start doing something besides sitting on their backsides and probably instigating the complaining, if not directing the complaining themselves. If you can't do leadership, then taking pot shots at the one who is a leader becomes an easy substitute, and sometimes even gets called "leadership."

Moses and the elders follow God's instructions and, sure enough, when Moses strikes the rock at Horeb, water pours out and the Israelites get their thirst satisfied by their gracious God once again. Having the elders with Moses, God is trying to teach the

people about grace and providence, about God's love and care. Has the message been completely learned by the Israelites? Nah.

Jesus finds himself with a tough audience, too, in the passage from Matthew. In Matthew's sequence of events, Jesus entered Jerusalem auspiciously on a donkey to cheering throngs. Then Jesus goes to the temple and drives out the money changers. He leaves for Bethany and spends the night. The next day, he is back in the temple and now he is teaching. Not surprisingly, the chief priests and elders of the people come to challenge this Jesus character who made such a big show and big stink the day before.

By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority? Of course, these folks **are** the authority in these parts, and they surely did not grant Jesus any authority. They would love for Jesus to claim his authority is from God; that would probably suffice, along with everything else from the day before, to justify arresting him for blasphemy and whatever else they could come up with. Actually, just about anything he answers is going to provide the excuse to arrest him. I'd imagine the temple guard is close by when these chief priests and elders approach Jesus in the temple.

Jesus wisely flips the trap back on the chief priests and elders. *If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I do these things.*

The chief priests and elders don't see this one coming, and frankly they're probably ill-equipped to handle the question in the first place. *John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven or from humans?* At this point, the chief priests and elders are looking rather amusing. Slack-jawed, eyes wandering as they think, a brief look at each other which is like looking in a mirror of blankness, followed by a quick huddle and some anguished words. Of the two choices, they know they can't answer with either response without causing themselves a world of problems.

They break their huddle and answer: *We don't know.* By admitting that they don't know, the people in authority admit their limitations, and have just had Jesus expose their limitations in a very embarrassing way.

Jesus has tried to teach these leaders of God's people some new things, but they seem quite resistant to changing their minds and learning new things. But God and Jesus are used to this stiffened resolve in the face of God's revelation of love, grace, and compassion.

Jesus isn't giving up. He launches into a parable about two sons. Each son get told to go to work in the vineyard (back in the vineyard again!). One son said, "No, I won't," but later changed his mind and went to work. The other son said, "Yes, I will," but then he didn't go to work.

Jesus asks the leaders, *Which of the two did what his father wanted?* The first one who rejected the father and later decided to be obedient, as opposed to the second one who accepted the father but then disobeyed him. Again we see Matthew being very

concerned about who goes first and who goes last, not far from last week's parable of the workers in the vineyard "unfairly" getting paid the same amount whether they worked all day long or only worked the last hour of the day. As we said last week, Matthew's concern is about the Jews claiming their pre-eminent (and exclusive) standing as those first chosen by God, compared to Gentiles who coming late to the salvation promise.

Here, there is another dimension with obedience. It's fine to be first in line, but if you're disobedient, how can your initial placement have any value? If you weren't first in line, having refused to repent of your sinfulness, but then became obedient and claimed your righteousness, how can your initial placement hold you back? The argument is a bit different, but Matthew is addressing the same subject essentially – explaining how it is that non-Jews, the non-righteous are made righteous in Jesus and become heirs to the salvation promise that was first given to the Jews alone. For Matthew's church and community, this is a huge issue and at the center of their new identity as Christians, as a church of Jesus Christ, and as an outpost of the Kingdom of God.

These stories continue to instruct us today, reminding us – the latest generation of stiff-necked inheritors of the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ – that it's better to get it right ... eventually ... than to remain steadfast and sure that you're already right. If our thoughts and actions fail to reflect the love, grace, and compassion of our Savior, we may need to get our minds turned around. We know already (or we should) how easily we slip into thinking in worldly patterns and modes.

Jesus told the righteous ones of his day, the chief priests and elders, that the way of righteousness is different from what they thought, from what you thought. He reminds them of John's ministry that reached out to the very ones despised by the righteous, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, deemed judged and condemned. Yet John's ministry turned around their lives, changed their minds and their hearts, making them – the despised – righteous in the eyes of God. Jesus' ministry followed John's pattern, bringing new hope and new life to those judged and condemned by society.

May our thoughts and actions reflect the love, grace, and compassion of our Savior, particularly as we encounter those we had thought judged and condemned, for these are the least in the Kingdom perhaps, and nonetheless most precious in the eyes of our wondrous God.