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Introduction

At the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland we run various teambuilding activities with groups that come in to learn about conflict and peacebuilding. With one activity there is a maze made up of various elastic cords stretching like a spider's web. The aim is to determine the pattern/route of travel from one side of the web maze to the other, stepping between the cords. Everyone must pass safely through the route without touching any of the ropes, and helping each other remember the path through. One person is allowed to enter at a time and if they step in a space that is not the path, they must leave the maze. What usually ends up happening is that everyone outside of the maze begins to talk all at once, suggesting what they think is the next step. The person in the maze, with the decision to make, cannot distinguish the voices and ends up getting confused as to where the next step is. In life, there are constantly voices speaking to us, pulling us to their perspective. These voices can come from any form of influence in our lives; family, friends, media, our religious tradition, etc... How have these various voices at play affect your decision making? How does it affect how you interact with others? How does it affect how you respond to Jesus? Do you change your attitude towards Jesus depending on the circumstance?

In this passage Jesus engages with conflict with the religious leaders. Pay attention to how he addresses their questions to him. How does Jesus address the answers that they give to him about John the Baptist? Can you relate yourself in any way to the religious leaders?

Text

Matthew 21:23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'"

But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.

The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

Which 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.

For 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.

Comment

In this story, the religious leaders want Jesus to be frank with them. They want Jesus to lay down the secret things about himself that they cannot understand. They are asking of Jesus to, in a sense, be vulnerable. To expose a certain side of himself that they wish to see. They want to know where this power to heal and teach comes from. 'Why does Jesus just think that he can flip tables in the temple? Who does he think he is?' We can imagine reasons. Maybe they want him to say something so that they can arrest him. Maybe some are genuinely curious. Maybe some even want to follow Jesus and lack a philosophical justification. Whatever the reason, they want Jesus to come clean.

Jesus' response is to tell them that there is a condition for him to share these things: first, they must also reveal more of who *they* are. They must show Jesus and the surrounding crowd a part of themselves that they do not want to reveal. They know what others will think of them if they take off their mask and show their true opinion of the baptism of John, yet they know that Jesus will call them out for unrepentance if they lie. In their discussion about how to answer Jesus, they decide that it is not worth it. They would prefer to save face in front of the crowd than to know Jesus more. The basis of their dialogue between themselves is solely based on the perceptions of others. They don't even discuss what they actually think, only the opinions of others. The ears of the religious leaders are tuned to the voices around them, neither to their own values, nor to God's still, small voice within themselves. Whose voice(s) do we listen to? Is there a voice that stops us from being truly honest in prayer to God? Is there one that holds us back from being

truly honest with ourselves? How often do we listen to our own spirit, when deciding what we desire, think, or feel? How can we better listen to and discern God's still small voice speaking within?

The story continues into a parable that Jesus uses about the religious leaders. He is very intent on telling the audience that it is specifically about the baptism of John and the unrepentance of the religious leaders. Even though they attempted to avoid Jesus showing their unbelieving hearts, Jesus does so anyway, calling them the son who says he will obey his father yet does not do it. In James 1:22-25 the author talks about those who hear God's voice, yet do not do it. It is as if they look in the mirror, seeing themselves in detail, yet go about their day forgetting completely what they look like. The religious leaders have said that they are God's people. They assume they are doing God's work. But Jesus says, 'some will say, 'Lord, Lord'... then I will declare to them, 'depart from me, I never knew you''(Matt. 7:22-23)

In Matthew 13 Jesus gives the parable of the sower. He explains to his disciples that the seed that is sown is God's Logos. Logos can be translated as spoken word. God's voice is being sown, and there are different ways people receive it. Jesus describes the Word that is sown among the thorns being those who hear yet 'the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the Word, and it becomes unfruitful.' (Mar 4:19) Voices other than God's come in and overcome it. These voices that tell us what to desire and come from all around. We see things that other people want, and we want the same. We see the media tell us that we will feel fulfilled when we finally purchase this new phone, or pay for that new exercise program. Families (perhaps even unintentionally) may pressure us into a relationship we don't want, or friends might push us into joining groups that we never cared to be part of in the first place. And after all of these voices have had their say, it can become difficult to differentiate between God's voice and the others. It becomes unclear which one is our own. Where in our life have we been at odds within ourselves, struggling between the voices at odds within? Can we take time out of our day to discern the various voices of influence in our lives and whether it causes us to be more fully ourselves, or to hide behind a mask?

Response

Spend time now thinking back on your week. Review what happened, how you felt, and how you responded.

Think about these questions:

1. Where in the week was God's voice strongest? What was God saying?
2. Where in the week were you influenced by other voices? Was there a time when you acted in a way that was dishonest, or in a way that you regretted?

Finally, thank God for God's faithfulness in all of this. That Jesus' love was with you through the times where you felt disappointed in yourself, and when you heard his call.

Prayer

Lord speak, your servant is listening.

During the times when too many voices call to me,

May your spirit call me into stillness.

Through my intentional time in discernment,

May you gently nudge me into your will.

As I go through my day,

Give me strength to say yes to your voice of love.

Let your will be done on earth,

As it is in heaven.

Amen