

THE WAY OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

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Matthew 21:28-32

Where would you go if you wanted to encounter a group of people who each had made poor decisions in their lives, people who had made devastatingly bad choices that wrecked their lives? Where could you find people like this? That answer is pretty easy. At a prison. Prisons are designed to house those people who purposely, conscientiously, intentionally, break laws and bring harm to an individual or to society. Murder, manslaughter, robbery, assault, gang violence, burglary, larceny, theft, arson, bribery, prostitution, tax crimes, selling drugs, racketeering, and more—these are some of the crimes that can land a person in jail.

On the other side of our nation, up in the state of Washington, there is a prison—a place where offenders are held. It is the Washington Corrections Center for Women. It is that state's largest and only maximum and medium security prison for women. It is a traditional prison with concrete walls and barbed-wire fences. It has an operating capacity of 740 inmates.

Within the walls of this prison, there is a church that was founded by Presbyterians. This church is called Hagar's Community Church. It is named after the woman in the Bible who was cast from her community and yet survived under the harshest circumstances. She survived with God's help.

This worshiping community was founded by Presbyterians to be a place that offers God's love to those who have been cast out, to those who have chosen the wrong path in life.

The pastor of the church puts it this way, "The women I have the opportunity and the privilege to pastor to are learning that they are still indeed loved by God and are not defined by their worst mistake." Their worst mistake is that action, that choice that led them to prison.

Jesus tells a parable about the choices that we make. This parable is about two brothers. The father fo these brothers tells one of them to go into the vineyard and work. I've always looked at this parable as if it were my own father telling me on a Saturday morning that he wants me to mow the grass that day. The first son says to his father, *No, I will not*. But, then later in the day, for some unexplained reason, he changes his mind and he goes into his father's vineyard and works as instructed.

After speaking to the first son and getting a 'no,' the father goes to his second son and says the same thing, *Go work in the vineyard today*. That son replies, *I go, sir*, but then he doesn't. This is the son that I relate to. Instead of simply admitting

that I don't want to mow the grass, I might say, "Sure, Dad," but then conveniently forget about what I had promised.

After telling this parable, Jesus asks the crowd, *Which of the two [sons] did the will of his father?* The crowd responds to Jesus telling him, *The first one.* Although he said that he wouldn't go, the first son does eventually do as his father commanded. The second son did not do the will of his father although he said that he would.

Then Jesus says to the crowd, *Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.*

Now this particular crowd that Jesus is speaking to includes the chief priests and the scribes of the great temple in Jerusalem. These are prominent people. Jesus is on the grounds of the temple (it may have been the parking lot) and the chief priests and scribes have come out to him to inquire on whose authority he is teaching. He tells this parable as part of his response to their questions. But after telling the parable, you can imagine how offended they were to hear him say that tax collectors and prostitutes were going into the kingdom of God ahead of them. They are the religious leaders of all the people. They are the best; they are closest to God. How dare Jesus imply that those lesser people—those obvious sinners—should be first.

And yet, that is what Jesus is saying. Why? Well it's like the parable. God calls some who say "no" but who later change their minds. God calls others who say "yes" but then do nothing. The tax collectors and prostitutes may not have responded to God initially. But after hearing the word of the messiah, they take the opportunity to change.

Jesus' indictment of the religious leaders is that while they make every appearance of following God, they don't.

Today is World Communion Sunday. Just like that church inside the prison, this day is a gift from the Presbyterian church to the world. Originally known as World Wide Communion Sunday, the idea for this day was hatched back in 1933 at the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A few years earlier, the pastor of the Shadyside Church, Hugh Thompson Kerr, had served as the Moderator of the Presbyterian denomination. As moderator, he formed this idea of all churches sharing communion together.

A few years was needed for the concept to gain traction, and slowly, the idea was implemented by other Presbyterian churches. It wasn't until World War II that the spirit took root with other denominations. In 1940, this notion of a world communion was adopted by the Federal Council of Churches who promoted it to churches around the world. I would like to say that today all churches recognize this

World Communion, but they don't. Nevertheless, the practice is celebrated by many churches around the world demonstrating the connection that we share in Jesus Christ, the ideals of love and peace that come from our God.

On this day, the Presbyterian denomination collects a special offering called the Peace and Global Witness Offering. You may know it as the Peacemaking Offering. The purpose of this offering is to help fund initiatives that promote peace in our world. Out of each dollar that you give, twenty-five cents stays with our congregation, twenty-five cents stays in Middle Tennessee, and fifty cents goes to the larger denomination. At each level, the money is used to help with projects such as Hagar's Community Church. The money that stays with our congregation is overseen by our Outreach Committee.

Why do we need an offering to make peace? It can be argued that peace should be the heart of the Christian life. It is certainly central in Jesus' message. From the gospels we read Jesus' words: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you*, and *Be at peace with one another*, and *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God*. Throughout the gospels and throughout scripture we find God's call for peace. Peace is not simply the absence of violence; peace exists when creation is in balance. Peace is present only when there is justice. We all remember those words of the prophet Amos, *Let justice roll down like waters*. Only when our world is awash in justice can we know peace.

So, many of the projects funded by the offering taken today focus on bringing justice to unjust situations. These projects address criminal reform, gun violence, racism, economic inequality, immigration policies, healthcare inequities, violence in all its forms, communities torn apart by war, hunger and homelessness, and more.

Each week we pass the peace of Christ and say "The peace of Christ be with you." The peace of Christ is part of what our faith offers to us. When we extend the peace of Christ—when we commit to work for peace—we are building God's kingdom right here among us.

On this World Communion Sunday, even though we can't gather as we would like, we celebrate that at the table, we are one—one in Christ and one in God. We are one not just in this parking lot, but are one with people of Christ all over this globe. The spirit that draws us together, draws us together in peace.

In the parable, the brothers either said they wouldn't but did, or said they would but didn't. As Christians, we should embrace a third way of saying we will and then doing. When God calls us to work for peace and justice, let us say yes let us act.