

1 October 2023
Pentecost 18

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Yes-Yes Faithful Son”

Text: Matthew 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-18; Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Holy Gospel we heard this morning is from Matthew chapter 21, which means it is the last week, the final week, of Jesus’ life. By the end of the week, He will be arrested, abused, crucified, dead, and laid in the tomb.

The week begins, Matthew 21 begins, with Palm Sunday. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a humble donkey, but the people pick up palm branches and wave them and hail Him as their king. And rightly so. He is. And after entering Jerusalem, Matthew tells us, Jesus’ first stop was the Temple. Which isn’t so unusual. People come to Jerusalem to go to the Temple and offer sacrifices. And since this week is the week of preparation for the Passover, that makes sense, and there would have been a lot of people - a LOT of people - doing that very same thing.

Except Jesus didn’t go there to offer sacrifices. Yes, He came to Jerusalem for that. True. But the sacrifice He came to offer was Himself, on the altar of the cross. He would be the Passover Lamb slain on Good Friday, answering the calls of the people to *Hosanna* them - save them. He would. In that way.

But *this* day, after entering into Jerusalem, Jesus goes to the Temple and cleans it out. Now, know: this was one of the biggest money making times of the year - like the week before Christmas. People from all over were coming into Jerusalem and going to the Temple. And all those people had to exchange their foreign money for the Temple currency so they could buy sacrifices. *Ca-ching!* So when Jesus goes into the Temple and overturns the tables and drives out those who were exchanging the money and selling the animals . . . He’s not making friends.

Then Jesus spends the rest of that day healing the blind and the lame and all who came to Him into the Temple courts, and then He goes to Bethany to spend the night. It was quite a way to start the week.

Then on Monday, He comes back into the city and when He gets to the Temple, He is confronted - and this is what we heard today. ***The chief priests*** - the church leaders - ***and the elders of the people*** - the political leaders - which means all the powerful people,

come up to Him. They don't want *Temple destruction, the sequel!* So they come up to Him and very publicly challenge Him. *What gives you the right? What gives you the right to come here and create chaos?*

Jesus answers them in two ways. First by asking them about John the Baptist, and then with the Parable of the Two Sons. But these two are really the same. And it boils down to this: When God calls you to repentance, how come you do not repent? For this is ***the way of righteousness*** that Jesus speaks of. The way of righteousness is not first and foremost what you do, or your good works, or anything you can do. **The way of righteousness is repentance.** To repent and receive the righteousness of God. Which is what the Temple was *supposed* to be all about, what John the Baptist *was* all about, and which Jesus was all about. And what Jesus accomplished for us with His death and resurrection.

So to create chaos in your life is the very thing Jesus has come to do! If you're looking for a Jesus to make you feel good about yourself or pat you on the back and say *keep up the good work!* - find another Jesus. Because the nice, comfortable, sinful life you've settled into is not good. So Jesus doesn't want to leave you there. He wants to stir things up in your life so that you will not rely on yourself or what you can do, your accomplishments or power, but that you turn to Him and rely on Him. Because what you do cannot save you. What He does, can.

Even ***tax collectors and prostitutes***. Those are the two groups Jesus mentioned today who were going into the kingdom of God before the religious and political leaders who were challenging Him. The people everyone thought that, well, if anyone's getting into the kingdom of God, it's them! Not so fast, Jesus says. And did you ever wonder why ***tax collectors and prostitutes*** are so often lumped together and that phrase is so often used? (1.) Money and (2.) sex. For what two things cause the most sin and havoc, the most scandal and controversy, are the two most common false gods in the world and in our lives today? Money and sex. And yet, Jesus says, those scammers, those ponzi-schemers, those identity thieves, those swindlers, those pornographers and the pornography-addicted, those sexually licentious, those caught up in alternative lifestyles . . . those who said NO! to God but heard the preaching of John and repented and were baptized, *they* are going into the kingdom of God. And y'all who say YES! to God and think God says YES! to you because you're good people and don't need to repent . . . that's not the way of righteousness. **For the way of righteousness is not what you do, but what God does for you in Jesus.**

That should give us pause . . . to think: What part - or parts! - of my life need a little chaos? Who am I looking down on? What are my false gods? What do I need to repent of? Do I see the way of righteousness as humility and repentance or self-improvement? Is my nice, comfortable life really an excuse for sin? Is my looking down on others just a way to overlook my own sin? Do you see the inconsistency in your own life? Your yes and no, no and yes flip-flopping? Back-and-forth we go, bouncing around from sin to sin,

from sin to God, from God to sin! And maybe, maybe even challenging Jesus along the way . . . What gives Him the right to butt in on your life? To call you out for your sin? To call you to repentance?

Well, first we could say He has the right because He created you. You wouldn't even be here or be alive if it weren't for Him. So there's that! But there's a better reason: **because He loves you**. So He wants to give you life. Life now and life forever. And if it takes a little chaos to do that . . . then chaos it is. Some things are just more important than live and let live.

So when the chief priests and the elders of the people ask Jesus by what authority He does what He does, He has the authority of the Law, of creation. But even more He has the power of the Gospel, of love, of forgiveness. And so through the Old Testament prophets like Ezekiel, and through New Testament prophets like John the Baptist, and through the preaching of the apostles and preachers today, Jesus is calling us to let go of our false gods which are causing us to lead lives of sin - to change our minds, to repent, and cling to Him instead. And to find our life in Him. That's what the tax collectors and prostitutes did, that's what Jesus wants the chief priests and the elders of the people to do, and that's what He wants for you, too.

That's why, as Paul preached, *though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*. Words, by the way, that we hear every Palm Sunday.

That's why Jesus did everything He did. Why Jesus was not a yes-no, no-yes flip-flopper, but a yes-yes faithful Son. That every knee would bow in repentance and receive Absolution. That every head would be placed under the forgiving, life-giving water of Baptism. That every ear would be opened to hear of the God who would come and do all this for us. And that every mouth would be filled with the Body and Blood that hung on the cross for the forgiveness of your sin. That the God who highly exalted Jesus would highly exalt you made righteousness by Jesus and who live in Jesus. That you not be like those who saw and heard but would not believe, but that you join the tax collectors and prostitutes, the Gentiles and women, the little children and sinners, the Magi and centurions - not ON the way of righteousness, but IN the way of righteousness. IN Jesus, by grace through faith. Who takes you into Himself, into His death and resurrection, and to everlasting life. A life that you have started and live *even now*.

And in that life, in Jesus, forgiveness becomes forgiving. Greed becomes generosity.

Pride becomes humility. Power becomes service. Accusation becomes repentance. Lust becomes love. Coveting becomes contentment. Apathy becomes hope. Silence becomes confession. Anger becomes patience. Revenge becomes charity. Selfishness become selflessness. Impulsiveness become prudence. Sinner becomes saint.

That's your life now. Not perfectly, of course. Maybe far from it! But IN the way of righteousness. IN Jesus. His righteousness working that in you, as you ***hold fast to the word of life*** - the word that gives life, proclaims life, and feeds and strengthens life. Your life here, from font, pulpit, and altar, and your life as you take this life and these gifts out with you into the world to give to others - to others whose lives are in chaos! - as you live as the child of God you are.

So with Jesus, it is not business as usual! Not in the Temple that day, and not in your lives. Now, it is to ***have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus***. A life of humility, joy, and love. And if it takes a little chaos now and again . . . thank You, Lord, for loving me enough to do that. To not leave me alone or in my sin, but to bring me to repentance and life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.