**September 28, 2014 – 16th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Well, once again, Matthew has presented us with a puzzling passage. If it makes you feel any better, in it Jesus presents the Pharisees and Scribes with a puzzle, too, so we’re in good company. Sort of.

Today’s passage is really two seemingly separate little vignettes. To help understand them both, and how they are, in fact, connected, we have to go back a ways in Matthew to get the context. There are three significant events that precede and inform today’s reading.

The first, in the beginning of chapter 20, is Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem amid cheering crowds waving palms shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" It’s Palm Sunday. We don’t read that part today because we’ve obviously already heard it on Palm Sunday itself.

So Jesus makes huge splash coming into the city, probably in the process making the Pharisees and Romans alike sit up and take notice with the people acclaiming him as a king and a prophet and all. The very next thing he does is head up to the Temple and throw out the money changers and the animal vendors. We don’t read this story today either, because we will read John’s version next year in Lent. The Lectionary committee is nothing if not frugal with these repeated stories in the New Testament.

A little historical background on the money changers, again for context. When people came to Jerusalem for the great feast of the Passover, while the Temple was still standing, they were coming to make a sacrifice and a tithe at the Temple. In Jewish law, there could only be one place to make sacrifices for your sins or for thanksgiving, and that was the great Temple in Jerusalem. One place, period. This was why it was so terrible that the Romans destroyed that Temple in 70 AD. It cut the heart right out of the entire Jewish religion.

But back to the money changers. People came literally from all around the known world for the three great festivals that were celebrated in Jerusalem – Passover, Sukkot, and Shavu’ot. They brought money with them to give to the Temple. However, the money that was used in the wider Roman Empire, or in other words the money they normally spent for everyday purchases, had a picture of the current Caesar on it and so was considered idolatrous and unacceptable at the Temple. It had to be exchanged for proper Temple money, and the money changers were only too happy to provide that service. At a fee, of course.

And then there were the animals to be sacrificed. The pilgrims either brought the animals with them, which was pretty inconvenient if they had to travel a long way, or else they bought animals when they got there. The sacrificial animals had to be absolutely perfect specimens in order to be acceptable, so there were vendors who would both provide the service of inspecting the animals that were brought, and/or selling acceptable animals right on the spot. Needless to say, most of the animals that the pilgrims brought with them were deemed unacceptable so a new animal had to be purchased.

I’m not sure if the sacrificial animals had to be purchased with non-Roman money, but that kind of double dipping wouldn’t have surprised me. It was quite a racket. And it was a racket that was essentially sanctioned by the Priests and Scribes, who might even have gotten a cut themselves.

So up comes Jesus, no doubt with the crowd of followers who had cheered his way into Jerusalem, along with his usual disciples, and what does he do but throw over the tables of the money changers and kick over the chairs of the animal vendors. I can just imagine the scene – money rolling everywhere and no doubt being scooped up by the crowd, and pigeons flapping and other animals running around mooing and baahing. It would have been chaos!

Then, as if nothing had happened, Jesus starts to heal anyone who comes up to him and the kids in the crowd take up the chant, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Meanwhile, the Pharisees are really starting to get ticked off.

Then the final event happens the next morning on the way back to Jerusalem from Bethany where Jesus and the disciples had spent the night. He was looking for breakfast and found a fig tree that should have had figs on it but didn’t. So he curses the fig tree and it withers and dies. Truth be told, I’ve always thought this was a little harsh on the poor tree. But taken in context both with what happens just after and the Jewish use of the fig tree as a metaphor for spiritual fruitfulness, it does make a certain kind of sense.

So this brings us up to our Gospel passage today. Jesus has ridden into town in triumph, overturned the longstanding tradition of cheating pilgrims in the Temple, and cursed a fruitless fig tree. But then, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, he calmly walks into the Temple and begins teaching. Well by this time the Pharisees had one nerve left, and this got on it.

“Who gives you the authority to do all of these things,” they demand, meaning everything that he had been doing up to that point, not just teaching. Although I’m sure the teaching didn’t go over very well either with the religious authorities who were charged with the education of their people.

And Jesus answers them with a challenge. “I’ll tell you what you want to know, but only if you tell me something. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ And I can just hear them muttering, “Crud! There’s no good answer to that! We’re trapped!” So after a hasty consultation among themselves, they come up with the lame, “Uh, we don’t know?”

“Well, too bad for you,” says Jesus. “I’m not going to tell you what you want to know. But I will tell you a little story…” And he proceeds to tell them the little parable about the two sons in the vineyard – the one who says he won’t go work, but changes his mind, and the one who says he will, but doesn’t.

All of this is leading up to one point for Jesus. Live your faith, don’t just talk about it.

In the parable of the two sons, neither of them comes off as being particularly great. One is recalcitrant and stubborn and one is a fibbing lazybones. But the stubborn son eventually repents and goes out to work while the one who sounds good and faithful initially does nothing.

Live your faith.

In the case of the fig tree, a fig tree gets preliminary fruit before it gets leaves, so a fully leafed out tree might look healthy and productive, but without fruit it’s all show and no substance.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees and Scribes that, for all their supposed religious authority, they are showing that their faith is just words and no depth. Even when challenged, they let their fear of the crowds or of being shown to be in the wrong dictate what they say, rather than true conviction.

Live your faith, Jesus is telling us.

The English writer and theologian, G.K. Chesterton, once wrote: "Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair." We Episcopalians tend to be a heady bunch. We like to analyze and evaluate and consider. And this isn’t necessarily a bad thing unless it takes the place of true faithful action. Action as small as a grateful prayer before falling asleep or as large as feeding five thousand people.

We need to stop talking and start doing. We need to live our faith. And if we truly, authentically, live out our faith every day, amazing things can happen. If everyone we encounter we meet with the thought, “How can I show Christ’s love to this person today?” that person will be touched by God. If every e-mail or letter we send, or every phone call we make, we initiate with the thought, “How will I communicate the love of God in this message?” God’s love will find its way into the heart of that recipient. And if we wake up every morning with gratitude for everything God’s given us, we can’t help but act with generosity in response to that gratitude.

How can we live our faith today and every day? What can we do to show the love of Jesus to everyone we meet and in every situation. Because that’s what he’s calling us to do. But like the two sons, and like the tax collectors and sinners that Jesus hung around with, we’re not perfect, and sometimes our faith just doesn’t seem like it’s enough. However, God IS perfect and amazingly, he loves us, whoever we are and wherever we coming from. And if we truly, authentically, and gratefully live our faith every day, it will be enough.

Amen.