

Sermon for September 27, 2026

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Exodus 17:1-7 Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16 Philippians 2:1-13 Matthew 21:23-32

What do you think?

This past week I've been thinking – maybe we've all been thinking – about the really big mess the world is in. You know, climate change; AI gone rogue and ending human life on this planet; political upheaval; years-long wars; and of course, hunger and disease on a massive scale.

And I remembered a book of poems given to me by my niece, Alayna. The poet is Julie Bruck, a Montreal poet. The book is called, **How to avoid huge ships**. Brilliant title, I think. Especially as we consider the size of the problems bearing down on us.

The poet takes her title from another book, a mariner's guide by Capt. John W. Turner. He writes, "My most fervent desire is that this book serve as guide and best friend when you find yourself in a tight situation with a large ship." Such lumbering ships," he remarks, "are slow to turn. They can be very difficult to stop."

Can it be that today's people are already on a sea of troubles? And coming our way is a great, lumbering ship of even more disasters, a ship that is very difficult to stop? I'm not just talking about the situation on the Strait of Hormus. That ship seems to get bigger every day and it's hard to avoid. There are wars that drain the coffers of countries; we have spiraling personal and even national debt. We try not to think about famine and the deaths of children, and about technologies that wreck the planet.

It's a useful image, being in the path of a huge ship. It may be especially useful as we consider our future as MacNeill Baptist Church or even the future of the Christian Church worldwide. Are we a lifeboat? Or are we the big, lumbering ship bearing down on others? The good news is that it's not too late to do more than hope and pray we can effect life-giving change.

In today's gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus comes to the Temple in Jerusalem, to the centre of power for Israel. You could say he moves from the backwater of Galilee to the city of Jerusalem, the big roiling sea that is life in the Roman Empire. That Empire life was conflict-ridden, always under pressure from neighbouring countries and cultures. It was ruled by a succession of cruel kings like Herod, with his gang of informers and secret police, backed by the might of Rome's army. Sounds a bit like the front pages of our newspapers, from that same area of the world, doesn't it? Jesus enters the city from the margins, from the backwater Galilees where he has been healing and teaching, into the centre of power. Palm

Sunday marked his entry and since then his presence and reputation cannot be ignored. The chief priests and elders, the elites of Jerusalem, come to challenge him.

Now the elites, the aristocrats of Jerusalem, are used to warming themselves at their hearths, surrounded by privilege and servile flatters. Anyone not on their side is excluded, humiliated, even arrested. Those excluded ones are even shut out of the Temple worship. They include the hungry, homeless, weary, unsafe, hopeless ones: the sinners, they were called. Those are the sort of people Jesus gathered around him. There was no middle class in those days and so there was a huge gap between the elites and all the rest.

When Jesus strides into the Temple courts to teach, he is there on behalf of those too afraid and too beaten down to challenge the powerful, to move into the path of the ship of state. He steps into the space the elites have claimed as theirs, the arena of religion, politics and economics, whose centre is the Temple that dominates the Jerusalem skyline. And you could say Jesus is determined to turn the great ship of Empire around.

Right away the elders question his authority to teach. We know what that's like, to have our authority questioned. In our day people ask, what right do churches have to tell people how to live, how to do politics, how to spend their money? Remember when we all worried we might become irrelevant? Well, the bad news is: we are! More and more, our good news is being challenged and deemed irrelevant. And like Jesus before the Temple elite, we are often in danger of being shamed. That's what the elders are up to. By questioning Jesus' authority in public, they hope to shame him.

The elite demand to know who gave Jesus authority to teach. Jesus' counter-question to those in power is simple. He asks, "Was John the Baptizer sent by God?" It's a sneaky way of asking, are you on God's side or are you working against God? He asks the essential question, now as then: Are you on God's side? And remember, this is all playing out in front of a crowd. It's very public. And honour is at stake.

Well, that one well-aimed question causes chaos. What he's really asking is, are you on the side of justice and peace and compassion? Obviously the elites aren't ready for this showdown. They bicker among themselves. They're having trouble holding on to their dignity as Jesus stands there waiting, before that crowd of onlookers.

The elders want to be popular with the crowd. But crowds can be fickle. The crowds in Matthew's story have seen Jesus healing people, welcoming outcasts, teaching about the Realm of God, so they're interested to hear the answer Jesus' question: was John sent by God? If the elites say John's just a misguided wild man and not a prophet sent by God, they won't be popular. So they don't commit themselves. "We don't know," they say.

Into the silence that follows Jesus begins to tell a story. He starts out, "What do you think..." Here's where we all get gathered into the story and consider carefully deeply what

we think. You see, Jesus says, there is this father with two sons. This father wants his sons to work in the vineyard today. He wants to include his sons in this enterprise of planting, nurturing, harvesting the grapes and making that new wine. The first son doesn't do that modern thing our kids do when we give them a job to do. He doesn't say, hang on a minute, I'm in the middle of a game, or, I'm just texting with someone. The first son just says no. Granted, later, he changes his mind. He respects his father's will and goes to work in the vineyard. But he says a blunt "no."

Now the father goes to the second son and says what he expects of him: Son, I want you to work in the vineyard today. That son says the right words. He says, yes. But he doesn't want to inconvenience himself. So he doesn't actually go. Jesus asks the elites, "Which of these two sons did the will of his father?"

The answer is a bit confusing. We know what a high value honour has in that ancient culture. Clearly the first son publically dishonoured his father by saying no. That he later changed his mind isn't the point. He says no, right out! Everyone in the vicinity can hear. The chief priests elders shake their heads knowingly. They don't like the way the first son disrespected his father. I mean, it's right there in the Torah: Honour thy father and thy mother. They like the way the second son says, yes, thereby honouring his father.

Jesus says, "I don't think you're quite getting' it. In fact, you are the second son, the yes man, the one who pays lip service to our Father, our God. You say yes but then have refuse to work in this new vineyard God is making, the one that began with John the Baptizer; the vineyard John planted with sinners and outsiders. You would not line up to be baptized with the lame, the blind, the homeless, the poor. You kept to yourselves. And now, you don't look so smugly confident. The Roman Empire will end, I tell you. Your privileges will end. And you have chosen to side against God." You can imagine the chagrin of the elites, the delight of the crowd.

Well, which side are we on, in our churches, two thousand years later? Do we believe John's story, that he's sent by God? You see, there's an offer here. It's a way to avoid some of the huge ships drawing closer. It's a way to live our lives with grace and courage, to live as blessing to the world. Do we want to work in the vineyard? That is, do we want to be part of the coming Reign of God? Do we join the excluded, the desperate of our world? Or will we go to work in the vineyard, get our hands dirty, share the work with desperate people, people of no privilege at all?

When we talk about that new life that is offered in Christ Jesus, I wonder what are some of the things we might consider going to work on? Here are some of the things I thought of. One is helping people find meaningful work and suitable housing. Not the rhetoric we'll hear on the news for the weeks leading up to elections. But continuous speaking up on behalf of people who can't find work, or who need some support and training to find that work and to

find a place to live. If that's what people around us in this city worry about and despair about, then it is part of our calling.

I think that new life is also about safety. Our calling is to think deeply and carefully about safety, perhaps alongside others in churches and outside churches. We're called to work for the safety of children, women, the elderly, teens, gay and lesbian and transgendered persons, and newcomers to our country and city. We make it a priority to keep learning about issues and to help strategize. We talk a lot in churches about salvation but safety is part of that word: it means health, wholeness, full life. In one small way it may mean providing breakfast for children at a nearby school who would otherwise be trying to learn on empty stomachs.

This story opens up so many possibilities and we can't do them all. But we have to start somewhere. We're called to go down to that river and hear again what John has to say; to go down to the river and get really wet. Go the vineyard and get dirty.

MacNeill is our home. We come here and know we're welcome, we're safe, we can learn here and be fed. But this building and these friends are not the whole vineyard. And there is in our midst One who calls us is the same one Paul describes in Phil 2, "who though he was in the form of God...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross – the One whom God highly exalted, the One whom we call Lord and whose Spirit we are sent to heal the world." Amen.