

Sermon for Sunday, Oct. 1/23

Paula Papky for MacNeill Baptist Church

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

“What do you think?”

It’s been a while since I read one but I’ve always loved the humorous books of Robert Fulghum. He’s the one who wrote, *Everything I know I learned in kindergarten*. My favourite is *It was on fire when I lay down on it*. Apparently, Fulghum read the story in a tabloid newspaper. A small-town emergency squad was summoned to a house where smoke was pouring from an upstairs window. The crew broke in and found a man in a smoldering bed. After the man was rescued and the mattress doused, the obvious question was asked: “How did this happen?”

The man replied, “I don’t know. It was on fire when I lay down on it.”

Fulghum describes it as a life-story in a sentence. One might say, well, I was looking for trouble and got into it as soon as I found it. We all know about doing what we don’t want to do – and failing to do what we do want to do, as Paul describes this dilemma. Fulghum writes: “One lives with the dilemma, and in the living takes comfort in the company of those who habitually lie down on burning beds of one kind or another.”

We have a wide choice of burning beds in our world. Global warming seems almost too obvious as the burning bed and yet we keep lying there, quietly smoldering. We have wars that drain the coffers of countries. We have spiraling personal and national debt. We have a history of abuse and neglect of our indigenous peoples that has reached a crisis in the discovery of unnamed

children's graves. I don't need to go on. But it's a useful story, the man on the burning bed, as we reflect on our future as MacNeill Baptist Church and, on this World Wide Communion Sunday, the future of Christian faith worldwide. Some days we may think we can smell smoke. And yet the good news from Matthew's gospel is that it's not too late to relearn how to be the church; to learn new ways of being the presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus comes to the Temple in Jerusalem, to the centre of power for Israel. It's as if Jesus steps out of the burning bed that is life in the Roman Empire. That life was conflict-ridden, always under pressure from neighbouring countries and cultures, 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.

Jesus strides from the margins, from the backwater Galilees where he has been healing and teaching, into the centre of power, the Jerusalem Temple. His very presence at the temple and his 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 by servile flatterers. Anyone not on their side is excluded, humiliated, even arrested. Those excluded ones are the hungry, weary, unsafe, hopeless ones, the sinners, 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 the peasants. When Jesus strides into the Temple he is there on behalf of those too afraid and too beaten down to challenge the

powerful. He steps into a space the elites have claimed as theirs, the arena of religion and politics and economics, whose centre is the Temple that dominates the Jerusalem skyline.

Right away the chief priests and elders question his authority. We know what that's like, to have our authority questioned. 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, we are! More and more, our good news is being challenged and called 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 are trying to shame him.

Jesus is up to the challenge. He has a strategy. And he's canny. He knows how the honour/shame thing works. He simply sidesteps the question about his authority and asks them a question. He talks back. He stands his ground. His strategy of asking a question right back is one we in the modern church could learn when we are challenged and shamed. Of course, we have to be sure of our ground. We have to know what we believe are the roots of injustice and war and poverty and we have to know what we believe should be done for the vulnerable of the world.

Jesus' counter-question to those in power is simple: "Was John send 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?

His question provokes an argument among the elite. One well-aimed question, one focused question, causes chaos. Because 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; they have 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. You know how that works – or sometimes doesn't work! Like when you think the people want a Ferris wheel and a big indoor mall and a spa and parking lot down by the lake. Crowds can be fickle.

The crowd witnessing this contest of wits has seen Jesus healing, welcoming outcasts, teaching about the Realm of God, so they're interested to hear the answer to Jesus' question of whether John was sent by God. But if the elders say that John's just a misguided wild man and not a prophet sent by God, they won't be popular. So, they back off. "We do not know," the elites say. Well, what do those with power and privilege know or care about the lives people live? The elites of any day never know what burning beds people lie down in. Often they seem to shrug as if to say, what's this crowd got to do with us?

Into the silence that follows, Jesus begins to tell a story. "What do you think?" he begins. Here's where we all get gathered into the story and consider what we thin, consider carefully and deeply. Jesus says, there is this father with two sons. He wants his sons to work in the vineyard, He wants to include his sons in this enterprise of planting, nurturing, harvesting the grapes and making new wine.

The first son doesn't do that modern thing our kids do. He doesn't say, hang on a minute, I'm in the middle of a game or I'm sending a text. He just says no. Granted, later, he changes mind. He respects his father's will and goes to work in the vineyard.

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. You know, he gives his father a sort of glazed-eye glance, nods in his general direction, mumbles sure, sure, whatever. I'm on top of it. But he doesn't want to inconvenience himself or put himself out. So he doesn't actually go. Jesus asks, "Which of these two sons did the will of his father?"

The chief priests and elders nod their heads knowingly. They don't like the way the first son disrespected his father, but the kid did come around in the end. So, they answer, the first son.

Here's where Jesus points out the sting of the parable. "I don't think you're quite getting it," Jesus says. "You – all of you – are neither the father nor the obedient son in this story. In fact, you are the second son, the yes-man, the one who pays lip-service to our Father, our God. You have refused to work in this new vineyard God is making. The one that began with John the Baptizer. You know, John. The one whose head you had on a platter because you did not believe he was sent by God. You would not line up to be baptized with the lame, the blind, the homeless, the poor. You kept to yourselves. And now, your fragrant beds are smoldering. The Empire is smoldering. It will end one day. 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? Do we hear this new way that's being offered? There's an offer here, a way out of the burning beds, into a life filled with relevant, useful, meaningful work. Do we want to work in the vineyard, with the tax-collectors and sex workers whom Jesus said would go into the Kingdom ahead of the elites? The story seems to say that the elites saw John, saw God's new way on offer, but would not change.

Like many of Jesus' parables, there is an invitation here. The listener is invited to make a choice: will we put on our flame-proof pyjamas and say our prayers and try to get to sleep? Or will we go and work in the vineyard, get our hands dirty, share the work with excluded ones, people of no privilege at all?

The story opens up so many possibilities for working in God's vineyard and we can't do them all. But we have to start somewhere. Go down to that river and hear again what John has to say. Go to the river and get really wet. Get immersed in a life of gathering, welcoming, reaching out. Go to the vineyard and get your hands dirty.

MacNeill and its congregation are our home. We come here and know we're welcome, we're safe. We can learn here, be fed. But this building and these friends are not the whole vineyard. There is in our midst One who calls us, invites us, who says, Son, Daughter, go and work in the vineyard today. The One who calls us is the one Paul describes in Philippians 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 in whose Spirit we are sent to heal the world.
Amen.