

# Towson Presbyterian Church

October 1, 2017 – World Communion Sunday

Philippians 2:1-13 and Matthew 21:23-32

*“That We All May Be One”*

Rev. Joel Strom

Charles Campbell, who is a Professor at Duke Divinity School, tells the story of channel surfing one night when he came across a TV show where Dr. Phil, the TV psychologist and celebrity, was being interviewed. During the interview Dr. Phil was asked, *“If you could interview anyone, Dr. Phil, past or present, who would it be?”* Without hesitation Dr. Phil replied, *“Jesus Christ. I would really like to interview Jesus Christ. I would really like to have a conversation with him about the meaning of life.”*

As soon as he heard Dr. Phil’s answer, Charles remembers thinking, *“Oh no you wouldn’t, Dr. Phil. You would not want to sit down with Jesus, treat him like an interviewee, and ask him about the meaning of life. You would be crazy to do that. He would turn you upside down and inside out. He would confound all of your questions and probably end up telling you to sell everything you own, give the money to the poor and come and follow me. No, Dr. Phil, you do not want to interview Jesus, and I do not want to either, Charles said. It would not go well.”*

We could also say it did not go well for the religious leaders - the chief priests and elders – who came to Jesus with questions. Our reading from Matthew begins with Jesus entering the temple in Jerusalem. It’s helpful to note that he was there just a day before and had caused quite a ruckus by turning over the tables of anyone who was selling anything and making a profit. And so when he comes back the next day he’s, as expected, immediately questioned by the religious leaders. They challenge his authority and try and back him into a corner, and Jesus responds as he often does, by answering their question with a question. And then then tells a story about two sons.

As he finishes that story, can you picture the look on the faces of the religious leaders? Can you see the look of shock, confusion and maybe even outrage? I can see their heads spinning in disbelief and their jaws dropping to the floor. *He said what? Did he just say what I think he said? The crooks and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God before us? Wait, what?*

I don’t blame you if you feel a little uncomfortable after hearing today’s scripture. It’s jarring and unsettling, which is what we get with Jesus sometimes. We often don’t get the warm and fuzzes from him, but he instead a challenge, as he invites us into a new way of life, a new way of being and seeing.

So he tells a story about two sons. The first son says he won't go and work in the vineyard – he's not willing to go and do what his father is asking him to do, but then he changes his mind and goes and he does the work that he is asked to do. The second son then says he will go and do it – *he says all the right things* - but then in the end he doesn't do it.

In this story Jesus seems to be far more interested in our actions than in making sure we have all the right answers. He seems to be far less interested in making sure we all are exactly in line with correct, unified beliefs, and far more concerned with making sure we do what we say we believe. The second son has the right answer, he's correct, but there's nothing to show for it. This story about the two sons is saying if you don't actually do it, if there's no action to your faith, if there's not action backing up what you believe, then what you believe, it really doesn't mean anything, does it?

Somewhere along the way Christianity became all about believing the right things or being a part of the right group, whether that's Catholic or Methodist or Baptist or non-denominational or Presbyterian. There's that great joke about the guy that makes it to heaven, have you heard this one? He enters into heaven and he's just blown away and in awe of what he sees. He's talking to a couple people at the entrance and he hears this commotion going on but he can't see who's speaking. There's a lot of voices and chattering over there and he says, "*What's going on over there?*" His friend replies, "*Oh, that's the Baptists, keep your voice down. They think they're the only ones here.*"

Now, please know I have nothing against the Baptists. I have good friends that are Baptists. I'm sure in their version of the joke the Presbyterians think they're the only ones who got in. The point of the joke is that it doesn't really matter how you act, all that matters is what you believe and who has the correct understanding of God.

In this story Jesus says, *well that's kind of missing the point.*

If we were to take our faith and whittle it down to its foundation and core; if we were to take Jesus and the example he set and how he described God and whittle it down to its core; if we were to take the Scriptures and whittle them down, we come to this very basic belief: that God is love. And by believing that God is love, God's love transfers to us and then we can love too.

Friends, we can believe all the right things, but if we're not slowly becoming more and more loving people, then we're kind of spinning our wheels in the Christian faith.

And I know why you are here today, why you've gotten up out of the bed this morning, it's because you want this. You want to be a more loving person and you want to act differently in the world. So the question then in front of us is: how then do we learn to love? Because when we

look out into our culture, and what's going on in our country, I'm not going out on a limb here to say that we don't know how to love. When I say love, I don't mean in the "Hallmarky" kind of way where there's a lot of warm and fuzzes and you feel good, but the kind of love and way of life that Jesus invites us into.

Because, speaking for myself, I'm not bad at loving people who look like me, or who think and believe the way I do. I can hold my own there. But I find it much more challenging to love those who are different than me, or who do not believe and think the way I do, whether that's theology or ideology.

If we truly want to learn to love, not as a feeling we receive but an action we give, we learn to love by moving out of our comfort zones and loving someone who is different than us. We learn to love by loving someone who is different than us, whether that's religion or socio-economic or sexual orientation or political party. That's how we learn to love...by doing it.

And so today is World Communion Sunday, and all over the world people within Christianity are gathering around the Lord's Supper and participating in this ancient ritual where we share bread and wine and we remember the new covenant and new life that Jesus invites us into.

And when we think about all the different kinds of denominations and people that are gathering around the Lord's Supper today, in all honesty, we don't really agree on that much when it comes to Christianity. If we gathered twenty random Christians and locked them in a room together, we'd be hard-pressed to come up with some creed or theological statement that we all could sign at the end. It would be next to impossible.

Which is really sad, because towards the end of John's gospel Jesus prays that all of his followers would be One, and how far from that reality are we today.

But from today's story about the two sons, Jesus seems to be far more concerned with our actions than making sure we have all the right answers.

Maybe what unifies us is not that we believe all the same things about God. Maybe what unifies us is our belief that God is love and by believing in God that transfers to us and we can then share it with a world that desperately needs it.

Maybe that's what can unify us, the global Christian church. And maybe that's what can unify and change us, too, Towson Presbyterian Church.

When we gather around the Lord's Supper we remember that God loves us, and we can love, too.