

**The Lessons Appointed for
Use on the
Sunday closest to September**



14

Proper 21

Year A

RCL

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

The Collect

The Collect

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing

there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Attendite, popule

- 1 Hear my teaching, O my people; *
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
- 2 I will open my mouth in a parable; *
I will declare the mysteries of ancient times.
- 3 That which we have heard and known,
and what our forefathers have told us, *
we will not hide from their children.
- 4 We will recount to generations to come
the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the LORD,
*
and the wonderful works he has done.
- 12 He worked marvels in the sight of their forefathers, *
in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan.
- 13 He split open the sea and let them pass through; *
he made the waters stand up like walls.
- 14 He led them with a cloud by day, *
and all the night through with a glow of fire.
- 15 He split the hard rocks in the wilderness *
and gave them drink as from the great deep.

16 He brought streams out of the cliff, *
and the waters gushed out like rivers.

Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to

the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

SERMON

When I was younger, and the conversation turned to discussions of current events, sooner or later one of us would make an impassioned plea for his or her point of view, delivered with bulging eyeballs and a cross expression. My old law partner, (now) Judge Jeffrey Preston's immediate reaction would be to back away and say, "How 'bout them Cats?" That was Jeff's way of moving the conversation away from an uncomfortable topic: "How 'bout them Cats?"

Engaging real-world topics of right and wrong in church will cause a lot of people to wander off muttering, "How 'bout them Cats". On the other hand, not engaging contemporary topics of importance can make the church ineffective in its calling to reflect God's love into God's Creation.

Long haired preachers come out every night

And they tell you what's wrong and what's right.

If you ask them for something to eat

They will tell you in voices so sweet,

“You will eat, by and by,

In that beautiful home in the sky

Work and pray

Live on hay

You'll have pie in the sky when you die.”

Is that the sort of church which Paul thought of? Is it the sort of church which can represent Jesus in our world? Engaging contemporary topics of his time was just what Jesus was doing when we join him this Sunday.

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

You could hardly blame them. “You don't work here”, they are saying, and with some justification. If I

wandered into Holy Family and sat myself down, teaching the people who came in, I can well imagine that Father Noe would have a problem with that, so we can be a bit tolerant of the chief priests and the elders of the people for their protest. If you are going to have a church, you must be protective of the church's teaching. Jesus hadn't been vetted, I guess you could say.

It's what happened next that resonates with me.

Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

In the time of Jesus, John the Baptist was the most controversial figure that you could imagine. If Jesus had wanted to avoid trouble, he could have picked from a truck load of topics to engage those who came to ask him what he was doing and who told him to do it. He

might even have claimed the mantle of a prophet and argued that he was bringing prophesy from the Lord. Instead, he stopped teaching and started meddling. He posed an uncomfortable question, an **IMPORTANT** and contemporary question, to those interrogating him. “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” With that single question, Jesus put “the preacher’s dilemma” squarely on the table.

In the resulting dispute among the Temple authorities, Matthew gives us a great picture of the preacher’s dilemma.

And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.”

John the Baptist was a very controversial topic, indeed. Flavius Josephus wrote about him:

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God...¹

Pick whatever noisy public person of the present time you wish as an example, pick Rick Pitino if you like, and you get an idea of the sort of trouble Jesus was wading into. A majority of the people of the time regarded John as a prophet, but his teaching and his life and death had been a divisive force in his time. Keeping divisive topics out of the worship space is the strategy of a successful preacher, for divisive topics, by their nature, divide God's children, yet a preacher with integrity must address evil in the present tense. Hence, the preacher's dilemma.

¹ Antiquities of the Jews (book 18, chapter 5, 2)

The preacher's dilemma goes like this: bad stuff needs to be confronted for I am called to speak the Word of the Lord into His creation, but if I confront bad stuff directly, I am afraid of the crowd. Therefore, it is better that I teach obliquely. Of course, I might preach too obliquely, fail to address the bad stuff, and leave people with the idea that God is a boring sort of intellectual exercise of no real application in the real world. If I am not sufficiently oblique, people will run away and talk about "Them Cats". Finding that balance is the preacher's dilemma.

It's not just the preachers who face this dilemma. All people of faith are called to speak the Gospel, and so must find a way to do so effectively while still not driving people into conversations that begin with, "How 'bout them Cats." If the teaching of the church may not involve itself with contemporary issues, what is the

point of the church? How do we manage the preacher's dilemma?

Not very well, I'm afraid. I was at the Chapel of St. Arbuck the other day and saw two men standing on the corner waving Bibles at passing cars. I won't be critical of their method, but How 'bout them cats?

On the news last week I watched Roy Moore, the "Ten Commandments" judge in Alabama (a man who says his intention is to draw America back to God) draw a pistol from his pocket and display it to great shouts of approval. He seemed to be teaching that the Gospel has a Second Amendment component. How 'bout them Cats?

Of course, the story of the kneeling NFL players was unavoidable. Colin Kaepernick explained his position stating, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and peo-

ple of color.” The response was that it is more important to respect the flag and our national anthem than to bring up uncomfortable subjects. How ‘bout them Cats!

Like Jesus, John the Baptist came from outside the Temple authorities. Just like Jesus, he spoke of uncomfortable things. The Temple authorities had determined that it was not helpful to the Temple to inject uncomfortable teachings into their worship space and did not seek out people who would shake the tree seeking new fruit. That is what John did – he fulfilled his calling in the face of the very people who were now questioning Jesus. To his uncomfortable question, Jesus added another.

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go,

‘sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?”

When a preacher or a brother or sister speaks and by speaking raises issues that make you feel uncomfortable, how do you weigh their words? Against the teaching of Jesus, or merely the measure of your discomfort?

AMEN

BENEDICTION

In our Old Testament passage, the people are in the wilderness, and they thirst, just as this generation thirsts for the Word of God, though they may not know from whence their thirst arises. Bringing that Word is hard. Hard as a rock, for the ways of the world are deeply entrenched.

The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”

The people thirst, church. Take your staff and strike the rock.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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