

“On the Horns of a Dilemma”

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Matthew 21:23-32

9/25/2011

I am not a news junkie, but I couldn't help myself this past couple of weeks. I have been regularly tuning into the evening news shows. It is hard not to watch with fear and anxiety as the stock market rockets up and down. I get addicted to watching all the people, including the current president, who are already running for election more than a year away. I start watching the European economy crisis and then I turn into the Arab spring as it moves into fall. All this news is not particularly helpful to my peaceful state of mind. In fact, it just creates anxiety.

I don't have any answers, but I do what I usually do when anxiety and fear threatens, turn back to the Bible. I try to listen to how Jesus was addressing the Israelite people in his day and age, looking for what might speak to us in our own day.

In the text today, Jesus is talking with the scribe and Pharisees and priests in the temple. We can presume that there is quite an audience of onlookers, people listening to how the priests respond to this street rabbi, this prophet. Jesus and the priests are arguing once more. Jesus asks the priests, “Did the baptisms of John the Baptist come from heaven or were they of human origin?”

The priests were stumped. They were caught on the horns of a true dilemma, “Dammed if you do, and dammed if you don't,” my dad used to say. A ‘catch 22’ situation we might call it; between a rock and a hard place. All I can think of when I get into a situation like that is to pray to God and say, “God, get me out of this. Please, I don't want to be here. I don't want to have to make such a hard decision.” I imagine most of the Congress: Republicans and Democrats feel the same way. How did I get into a position to have to make these decisions? I don't think I knew what I was signing up for when I agreed to run for office. Probably Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams felt the same way.

I can see the elders; they are nodding their heads, pulling on their beards, looking up at the sky, waiting for some inspiration. “HMM, if we say John was from God, then surely the Rome will hear that we have defended someone that was executed as a terrorist by Rome. Rome will be mightily offended, “heads will roll.” “But on the other hand, if we say John was just one of the folks, his baptisms meant nothing, then this crowd standing around is going to tell everyone what we said and we are going to have a riot on our hands, the people will stop coming to temple and paying their tithes.” “Why our jobs could be in jeopardy, or rather our nice tidy income. Rome will still hear that we cannot keep the peace and that we are unpopular and then...well, heads will roll.” Truly they were on the horns of a dilemma.

If the priests say John, executed as a disturber of the empire, came from God, Rome will hear that! If the priests say John was just one more religious nut, the people will raise uproars and Rome will hear this too.

When the priests don't answer, Jesus tells a parable: a father expects his sons to work in the vineyard. The story does not say how old the sons are. When almost everyone was a poor peasant, all children are expected to work. At the age of 6 a child was sent out to work in the vineyards. Children sent out to do a job, do not always follow through. Anybody who has any contact with children knows this. One child says, "No I don't want to do that," but thinks better of it later and goes to work. The other child says, "Okay dad," and then heads down to the river to play with his friends.

The way the story is told leads us to be sympathetic to the first child. Both children have a dilemma, as most children would. The children do not understand that in order for the family to eat, everyone must work, even the youngest. The sword of famine hangs over the house of the vineyard workers.

The sword of Rome hangs over the heads of the priests and scribes. Talk about being on the horns of a dilemma. Dammed if they do and damned if they don't. Talk about an anxiety-producing situation. The priests must deliver peace and quiet from the Jewish people. Their lives are forfeit if they do not. And if the people do not obey the orders delivered by the priests, then Rome will kill the people as the priests watch.

Well, we can look back on history and we know what happened. Actually, when Matthew writes down this story, the Jerusalem temple has already fallen. The city of Jerusalem is in complete ruins. There are no more priests or scribes or Pharisees. There are a hundred thousand less people in the city of Jerusalem.

What is Jesus' wisdom for this situation? Follow the path of Moses, follow the path of the prophet, follow the path of John the Baptist, and follow me.

The law of love is the love of the Torah, the law of love is the prophets calling out for justice and mercy for all, the law of love is John the Baptist, inviting everyone no matter what others may think or say about you, to receive the love and grace and acceptance of God. It is Jesus who brings the law of love forward again and again. "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." Mark 12:30, 31. The kingdom of God is already here, Jesus tells us. In the light of the cross we can see just how costly this love can be. All the people and all the priests and scribes and Pharisees discovered this as well. However, in the light of Easter, we can see just how much this love can accomplish.

As Christians, our path is laid out for us: scripture, sacrament, prayer and regularly participation in the community of Christ. Our encounters with the Lord are invitations to us to look beyond the current fluctuations on the stock market. Our time

with the Lord calls us to look at the world with less anxiety. What good does it to gain the whole world but to lose our souls?

Warren Bennis, the management expert, makes an important distinction between behaviors that we undertake to prove ourselves, and behaviors we engage in to express ourselves. We prove ourselves out of fear; we express ourselves out of gratitude. Proving limits us to questions to which we have already decided the answers. Expressing ourselves allows us to look for those rare glimpses of clarity amid the chaos that surrounds the current world economics. Proving our own point of view forces us into competition. Expressing invites us into cooperation.

When we are in a state of national crisis, which I think we are now, Jesus is saying to us, let love rule, listen carefully to each other. Cooperate and in the end, get a grip on reality! Remember, the only thing that is eternally important is your belief in the love and eternal light of Christ Jesus. Amen.