

Sunday, September 28, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Guard or Gardener?”

“By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?”

Authority is the power or right to direct the actions or thoughts of others: to control, command, or determine.

Sometimes authority is bestowed by a governing body – like that of law enforcement.

Sometimes it is attained by position, such as an elected official, a judge or even a parent.

Sometimes it is earned by respect, such as a civic leader or a particularly compelling author.

However it is attained, one of the responsibilities of authority is ensuring that the integrity of one’s position is matched by the actions taken.

In today’s lesson Jesus has assumed a leadership role that is making the current leaders uncomfortable.

The leader’s hope is that by questioning him in the public setting of the Temple, they will be able to undermine his growing authority and gather enough evidence to bring him to trial on charges of blasphemy.

This age-old technique is alive and well today in our political contests and elsewhere.

Questioning authority is almost an American way of life.

Even as a child, I remember my sisters and I had a saying, when one of us got too pushy, we’d say “Well who died and made you boss?”

Shane Hipps in his book, *Selling Water by the River: A Book about the Life Jesus Promised and the Religion That Gets in the Way*, reflects on how the Pharisees behavior is evident in our own churches today:

"Some, in an effort to protect and preserve the gospel message, have become like the guards in a museum, fueled by fear that its treasures could be damaged or stolen if they are not vigilant in their watch.

They have mistaken the good news for an ancient artifact that needs to be protected.

But that is not its nature.” *He continues*

“God’s kingdom is a lot more like a tree.

God is looking for gardeners, not guards.

A guard is trained in a defensive stance of fear and suspicion.

A gardener is motivated by love and creativity"

What are your motivations?

What role do you aspire to in God's kingdom?

Gardener or Guard?

Authorities, who speak in doctrines and write creeds, reduce what is possible to one thing only, while Jesus tells stories of heaven and earth in which all things are possible, and nothing is impossible.

He uses the parable to illustrate his point that what you do is more important than who you say you are.

By questioning the authority of the elders Jesus is holding up a mirror - forcing them to see the hypocrisy of their positions.

He was calling people- he calls us today - to a new way of living and acting in the world.

Do you know the two boys in the parable?

Are they familiar to you – the one who does what he is supposed to even though he resisted and the one who lied and then did nothing?

Again, I think of politicians who make promises to do one thing and then, once elected, do something else altogether.

Or church leaders – throughout history –who have abused the authority vested in them for their own gain or for the exploitation of others.

The two brothers in the parable present us with a challenge of self-examination.

The first son initially refuses to do the work proposed by his father, but later his sense of responsibility overrides his reluctance and he does the work – humbly, without fanfare.

The second son pretends to do his father's bidding, only to shirk his responsibility and neglect his work.

As in so many of Jesus' parables, we are faced with two extremes-which can make it easier to discount them as unfamiliar.

However, Jesus wants us to think.

He wants us to examine ourselves and determine if there is a little bit of each son in us.

As followers of Jesus and as members of the church sometimes we find ourselves acting like the first son; resisting the voice of God and refusing to follow but eventually toiling in the garden next to our neighbor.

This passage also challenges us to consider the ways we act as the second son.

We gather as a community of faith hoping to strengthen our abilities to live up to the values professed in scripture.

We desire a faithful response to God's call but sometimes wind up either not doing what we know we ought to do or retreating to the position of guards in a museum protecting a treasure.

Often we are reluctant to take on the tasks that we know we must.

Sometimes God calls us to things that are difficult or uncomfortable.

Just as often we find ourselves paying lip service to what we know we should be doing.

As Christians our job is to build God's kingdom here on earth.

Being a Christian in the world is hard work.

Paying attention to our neighbors in less fortunate circumstances is not always easy.

Life can be messy where Jesus calls us to be.

We have to get dirty.

We have to move outside of our comfort zones.

We have to get right down into the lives of our brothers and sisters.

I came upon a story, purported to be an old Japanese legend, that *tells of a man who died and went to heaven.*

Heaven was beautiful--full of lush gardens and glittering mansions.

But then the man came to a room lined with shelves.

On the shelves were stacked piles of human ears!

A heavenly guide explained that these ears belonged to all the people on earth who listened each week to the word of God, but never acted on God's teachings.

Their worship never resulted in action.

When these people died, therefore, only their ears ended up in heaven.

Have we become guards of an ancient treasure or are we gardeners growing both heirloom plants and sturdy hybrids, and adapting as the garden grows?

Where will our ears end up?

Each of us has a little plot of authority to which we tend.

It might just be our own family or it might be a giant corporation, but most of us find ourselves in a position of authority at some point.

What sort of leader are you? Whose will do you follow?

Do you listen? Do you do what you say you will do?

Are you seen as a person of integrity?

These are the things that we aspire to as Christians.

These are the things for which we ask for God's grace.