

THEY BELIEVED HIM
SEPTEMBER 28, 2014
MATTHEW 21.23-32
ST. CHARLES AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH.
ELIZABETH MANGHAM LOTT

Almost eight months ago, we gathered in this room to officially mark my calling as pastor of this church. I'd already been here for three months, but this was our time to pause for just a moment and reflect on what we had done in entering into a life together. We welcomed friends from Mobile and Birmingham and Richmond to bless us in our shared sense of calling. We delighted in a sense of right-ness and the knowledge that we had said "yes" to God's invitation.

One of the friends who traveled to be with us was pastor Justin Joplin who carried with him a mason jar filled with dirt from the community garden we planted together at Westover Baptist Church to support the church's food pantry. He brought that jar of dirt to speak a blessing over me of what happens when God breathes into dirt, saying once that happens, "It ain't dirt no more! Life, and growth, and hope, and wonders beyond our description...it all begins in that ordinary dirt."

Nathan and I went out to dinner with Justin on his first night here, and he had postcards and flyers of this church he'd been to visit just outside Toronto. I knew he was curious enough to interview with their pastor search committee, but I wasn't convinced my banjo-playing, App State football cheering, Richmond folk festival loving colleague would leave everything he knew to move to Canada. And I certainly didn't think he could convince his wife Kristy to join him on such an expedition. If they moved anywhere, I thought surely they'd move home to North Carolina.

But since that February morning, Justin was called from Richmond, Virginia, to Mississauga, Ontario, to serve as pastor of Lorne Park Baptist Church. He invited me to travel to Mississauga to speak at his installation service today, but I felt there was no easy way to make a trip to Canada happen this weekend. Instead, I sent a word that is to be shared in their service this afternoon and thought it might be fitting to share in ours, too.

Dear Justin,

How I wish I could be with you, Kristy, and the boys today as you celebrate your call to Lorne Park with your new congregation! I pray it is one of great joy and delight in looking back at the search process and wondering at God's ability to work with and in spite of us all to call us to something new.

As I preached through Genesis this Summer, I was struck by the repetition of God's desire to call us out of our ruts and rhythms and routines into a different way. A better way. A way that sometimes doesn't make sense or even seem possible. God whispers and coaxes and promises that there is goodness to be found in this unfamiliar way, but to follow means we must be willing to take some big chances and leave much that we love behind.

You and I had a good thing going in Richmond. We certainly had some hits and misses in ministry, but we also enjoyed remarkable creative freedom and flexibility as ministry partners in that little corner of South Richmond. I will forever be grateful to you for calling me in 2007 to ask if I would be interested in serving alongside you. I was stuck in a routine and pattern of life and work that no longer felt true, and you invited me out of that. God used that invitation to show me a life I dared not imagine for myself. You gave me space to dream and explore the breadth, height, and depth of God's call for that season of my life, and that creative work led me directly to New Orleans where I serve now as senior pastor. So much goodness came out of our time at Westover Baptist Church. We were committed to make a difference in that community and beyond in Jesus' name, and here we are now, both in the *beyond*.

Richmond is a beautiful place to live and raise a family. We were all comfortable and (mostly) settled there. But the comforts and known-ness of a place can stifle our ability to continue holding space for creativity and God-sized dreams. You and Kristy have inspired me by your bold and brave move to Mississauga. Please don't ever let this story become ordinary as "that time we moved North." You opened yourselves up to the possibility that God could be at work in ways you'd never before imagined. You said YES to the possibility, and my prayer is that boldness and bravery will continue to mark your ministry at Lorne Park.

Soon, when you and Kristy are balancing the demands of two jobs, two kids, household needs, and it all begins to feel quite ordinary and unromantic, take a walk outside and look at where you are. Name out loud what you see and remember how it felt to first be called to some place new. Remember that time you moved North in boldness to discover what God was dreaming for you. Remember that you were brave not just for yourself but for the two boys who are watching you believe in a God who calls us out of our routines to dream bigger dreams for the sake of God's kingdom. Your story is now theirs. Make it a good one. I am watching eagerly from New Orleans and so grateful for your friendship. Love, Elizabeth.

Our Gospel text this morning gets at this idea of living inspired lives; saying “yes” boldly, in God’s name. The religious leaders have been watching Jesus closely for some time and cannot make sense of his words and actions. He does not do things in the ways they expect, so they assume his way is wrong and theirs is right. The passage begins with a question about authority. We might first read their question as, “What gives YOU the right to say and do these things? Just who do you think you are?” But the question is actually about the source of his authority. They do not question that Jesus teaches and heals with some kind of power, but they want to know how he got it. Is this God moving through him? Satan? Just his own personal sense of giftedness? “Where is all of this coming from, Jesus?” might be the real question.

In the verses above ours for today, Jesus famously became irate in the temple and chased out the money changers. The state had set up a market exchange within sacred walls, and the temple was becoming an increasingly secular place. People came in and participated in rituals with no marked outcome in their personal lives. The structure needed to be flipped on its head, so he flipped tables to make his point.

“Where is all of this coming from, Jesus?”

The gift for drawing a crowd and teaching so freshly, the passion behind his message to renew faith and let go of the trappings of religiosity that keep people from experiencing God, the way people were made whole by him...where did it all come from?

And they weren’t just talking about Jesus’ authority. Before Jesus was causing a stir, there was his cousin John the Baptizer. The religious leaders want to know what Jesus is all about, and he redirects the question to John because they had long since rejected John as a legitimate teacher of God’s ways. Whether Jesus or John, writes Douglas Hare, the question posed really asked, “Was John’s ministry from God or just another instance of humans playing with religious ideas?”¹ Was it just passionate words? Or was there something powerfully alive in and behind and underneath and before and after all of those words?

Jesus knew that if they didn’t understand and accept John’s teaching, the religious leaders were going to reject him, too. It didn’t matter how he answered their question about authority because they had the answer already in their minds.

So he told a story instead.

¹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, p. 246

We're back at the vineyard. There's work to be done, but this time the landowner is the father of two sons rather than an employer searching for anyone who will work the fields. So the father goes to his two sons to ask for their help. It seems one is the "helpful" son and the other the "lazy" son. Maybe it's good son and bad son. Maybe it's right son and wrong son. But initially it seems one honors the father with a "yes" while the other disregards the father with a "no." Then Jesus flips the story like he flipped those tables, and the sons do the opposite of what they said they would do.

When Jesus tells a story, he doesn't always explain his point, but here he elaborates just a little bit as he debates his colleagues. "Who honored God in this story? Who got it right? Who demonstrated what God wants from us?" The first one, they say. The one who said he wouldn't do the work but then went and did it anyway. Our words aren't enough. Our ways reflect what we love, what we value, and whom we honor.

It is not in the professing of faith with right words or the acting out of worship with right manners that we become people of God's way. God's way is to be lived out, and it is only in the acts of our daily lives that we demonstrate we are taking all of this seriously. We may hold a shared sense of integrity in worship or excellence in musical performance, we may value lively debate and challenging discourse, but the thing that makes us Christ followers is the way we live our lives.

And so it was the tax collectors and prostitutes who believed John, not the religious leaders. They believed what he was saying, and they did something about it. His words changed their lives. His words about who God is and how God wants us to be the best versions of ourselves for the sake of the world and the sake of God's kingdom, those words sank in and washed over the ones least expected to receive them. They believed him. They were changed by him.

But the religious leaders did not believe him. And Jesus pushed them to the point of fury as he insulted their loyalty to religiosity over God's winding and unpredictable ways.

As with every parable, we ask, where do we read ourselves in this story?

For those of us who have lived long years inside the walls of American Christianity, Douglas Hare challenges, "Christians...can become blind to what God is doing in the world around them. How easily 'church work' denigrates into little more than simply maintaining the institution, with no excitement concerning what God's active grace is doing and consequently no enthusiasm for [talking about God] and renewal! We say

that we are going to work in the vineyard, but instead of harvesting the grapes we spend our time rearranging the stones along the path!"²

We can become so committed to preserving our comfort and our preferences that we are no longer able to see what God is doing around us. We hear John the Baptizer and wonder what he's so worked up about and why he's out in the woods instead of inside the temple. We can't figure out why so many people are drawn to him instead of to us. We can't believe him because the risk is too high. To believe him or Jesus or anyone challenging us to make a change for God's sake can seem terrifying.

But how much time do we want to dedicate to rearranging stones?

God calls us out of our routines and traditions, calls us out of the comfort of inertia, and promises something new. God is always calling, coaxing, inviting. We have to be brave and willing to listen. We have to be bold and willing to change a way, adjust a practice, relax our grip on what our life should look like to accept the uncertainty of what happens when God's will is done.

This is who we are called to be. As a church, we are organized around the boldness of Christ's ways. We are not the Boy Scouts or the Shriners or Amnesty International. There are thousands of national and international nonprofit organizations committed to doing good things in the world. What makes us distinct from those groups is the question the religious leaders asked Jesus: Where is all of this coming from?

Our call to social justice, our commitment to welcoming all people, our desire to hear various points of view, our perpetual intellectual curiosity. Do we value these things simply because they hold merit on their own? Because they reflect our personal interests? Or is the desire to seek justice, practice radical hospitality, listen to someone who is different from us, and be smart about faith rooted in who we understand Jesus Christ to be?

In this season of renewal as a church, we are asking questions about who we are today and who we will be in the years to come. We know what makes us comfortable. But what stretches us and invites us to live more fully into God's ways? What calls us out of the pews and onto the Lakefront to raise funds and walk in solidarity with the world's most vulnerable? What draws us out of our easy routine and into God's winding, mysterious way?

² Hare, p. 248

As we seek renewal in this congregation, may it be a renewal of the ways of God's kingdom; ways we have understood through the life and teaching of Jesus. May we discover a boldness in each other that propels us to say "yes" to something new. May we be inspired to bravely take risks for the new thing God is calling us to do. May we be transformed and renewed.

Amen.