

Last week, with Jesus' parable of the Landowner and the Tenants, our attention was focused on God's economy and how it differs from that of the world's, and especially our capitalistic economy which is its own kind of meritocracy. In God's economy all have what they need to survive and thrive. Its hallmark is equity rather than equality. It is just and generous. It requires us to love our neighbors, no exception, and work for the betterment of all who are created in God's image. It is also hard for us to live into given the context in which we live.

Today's parable, that of the man with two sons, is Jesus' response to the question concerning his authority and who gave it to him.

Jesus is in Jerusalem speaking with the chief priest and elders. He has already flipped over the tables in the Temple in response to the unjust actions of the moneychangers. The Temple authorities are both angry and threatened by the authority Jesus has exercised in their domain where they are abusing their authority. They have enriched themselves, monetarily and with prestige, at the expense of the very people God has called on them to care for. They have seen yet rejected John the Baptist's message of repentance and renewal, rejected his cry that the messiah is already among them. They are the second son in that they agree to do the work God has entrusted in them, but go off and take care of themselves instead, turning away from the will of God.

The tax collectors and prostitutes, however, hearing the message of John the Baptist, embrace it and turn from their sinfulness to the redemptive life it calls them to. They repent. They turn to the Lord. They attempt to align their lives with the will of God and God's kingdom. God is the authority over their lives. All Jesus' authority derives from God.

Ezekiel is a prophet during the Babylonian exile. The Assyrian Empire has destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, the only place the Israelites believe they can be in the presence of God, and has driven the elites into slavery and manual labor. And they cry out, "this is not fair!"

Israel has made a mess out of their relationship with God and Ezekiel reminds them, despite all that life has thrown their way, God is still the sole authority over their lives. They must simply repent and turn from their sin of rebelling against God and they will find God's mercy in forgiveness. "Turn then and live," says the Lord.

Our psalm pairs well with Ezekiel as it points to our God as trustworthy, even when it seems they have been defeated by their enemy. Salvation through God is still possible. Because of God's compassion and love, they will be taught anew God's ways – how to live well with God at the center and loving every neighbor as themselves.

Our Old Testament reading tells of the time of the first destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Matthew's audience, because this gospel was written in the years after, will know well the time of its second destruction at the hands of the Roman Empire around 70 AD. Like the 8th century BCE Israelites, they, too, have witnessed war, death, and destruction, losing all they cared about in the process. Both can be understood as times of failed leadership; of misuse and even abuse of power and authority over the people of God they were meant to care for.

It was failed leadership that led to the Assyrian conquest of Israel. It was failed leadership, their refusal to believe Jesus despite all they had seen, that led to the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus at the behest of the chief priests and elders of the Temple.

In both cases, failed leadership dooms the community to destruction.

No wonder Jesus spends so much time in his final days teaching the disciples, who will lead, and the crowds who will follow, how to form and live together in a community that is reflective of the kingdom of God – that place where unconditional love of God and neighbor is at the center. That place where peace with justice reigns and everyone has what they need to survive and thrive.

Jesus washes the feet of his disciples as a sign of his servant leadership – the ultimate demonstration of true authority in God’s kingdom. We live for one another and we care for one another as we strive to live into God’s kingdom even now.

In this light, St. Paul’s words to the Philippians, also struggling to be a community of the faithful, take on new significance. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

As Christians, Jesus is our ultimate authority – the way in which we come to know God and all that God desires for us to become. The kingdom of God is a return to the Garden of Eden, the true perfection of God’s creation and the place where deep in our hearts we all strive to be.

God’s authority resides first in Jesus and then in our hearts where as the body of Christ we make God’s love and care, justice and compassion, visible to the world.

We have a choice. We can embrace the failed leadership of the world or the unconditional loving authority of God in God’s kingdom. And while the choice and how to get there, by following Jesus, may not be a hard one, it will only be through God’s mercy and grace we can even begin to get there.