

## **The Big Ask**

Exodus 17:1-7  
Matthew 21:28-32

The words we read today, the words Jesus speaks to “the chief priests and the elders of the people,” he speaks immediately after entering Jerusalem on Psalm Sunday. He stands in the Temple courtyard as he speaks. He is speaking to the most powerful religious figures in Judaism on their home turf. And what does he choose to do with this opportunity? He chooses to goad them. To irritate them. To insult them. They have grown accustomed to deference from the people. Now this shaggy rabbi from the backwaters of Galilee looks them straight in the eye and tells them tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of Heaven before they do. The implication is clear: he means they will *never* enter the Kingdom.

As we know, their reaction will be equally clear: they will pester their Roman masters until they kill Jesus on the cross. As he intends. This, then, is the context of our passage, where it sits, what comes before and what follows. Let us turn to what Jesus actually says here. He tells a short parable. A man has two sons and a vineyard. He tells one son to go out and work in it. He says he will not but changes his mind and does. He tells his other son to go out and work in it. “Yes sir!” he says, but he does nothing. “Which of the two did what their father wanted?” Jesus asks the chief priests and elders of the people. “The first,” they correctly reply. Before we

move on to Jesus' conclusion, we need to identify the players in this parable. The father is God. The two sons represent two types of people: those whose actions please God, and those whose actions anger God. The chief priests and elders belong to the latter group. They say they obey God. They preen in public about their piety. "But," Jesus is saying, "I am on to you. I know you do not truly obey God."

This may be the most offensive thing Jesus implies in this entire encounter. The *reason* they will not enter the Kingdom is that he sees them as disobedient to God's law. They see themselves as radically obedient, as exemplars for the people on how to live in line with the law. But he is calling them hypocrites. This is a stinging rebuke—especially when we know its truth down deep inside. The more self-aware of the Jewish leaders know Jesus is right about them—and none of them like him anyway. According to Matthew, the next parable Jesus tells ends with him saying, "Many will be called, but few will be chosen." That word "chosen" has particular meaning. The Jews see themselves as the Chosen People. Not just their leaders, but also the common people, believe they stand at the head of God's line. Now Jesus is telling them they do not. They know he is right about their disobedience. And it stings.

Our passage from Exodus concludes with the words, "because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" The Chosen people have just started their long wandering through the Sinai wilderness, but already they have complained to Moses—and by proxy, to God—at least once before. In that instance they asked for food in the desert. Here they ask for

water. These may seem like reasonable requests. Though slaves, they had secure lives in the land of Egypt. They know the territory on each side of the Nile River stretches for hundreds of miles with only few oases. Each might provide a few date palms and a source of water. But the people number in the thousands. And they know where they are going only in the most general of senses. “Come on, God,” they are saying. “We obeyed your call to leave and traverse this wilderness. Keep up your end of the bargain! Give us the food and water we need.”

This puts Moses in an impossible position. As mediator between the Lord and the People, he cannot find a common ground that makes both sides happy. Christian gadfly author Leonard Sweet, in his book, Postmodern Pilgrims, writes, “Every professional mediator can relate. The job requires infinite patience as he or she tries to inch two or more parties closer and closer to an agreement. But Moses by this time seems to have no patience. He is under extreme pressure. He is the face of this expedition. The people are not budging from their position. They need food and water to live. And the Lord is—well—the Lord. How can Moses tell God what to do? He does the only thing he can do: he makes it about himself. He complains that he has become the target of the people's rage.”

Like our passage from Matthew, this passage turns out to be about disobedience. At various places the book of Exodus calls the people “stubborn”, “stiff-necked”, “ungrateful” and, of course, “disobedient”. It is their lack of faith that God will provide that provokes Moses, and we are told, God. Their refusal to trust that God's

provision will arrive on time. To the people, this seems like a pretty big ask, a lot to expect. To Moses and God, this seems like disobedience. But are we any better?

Missionaries Sam and Martha Moffett arrived in Korea in the fall of 1949, just weeks before the Korean conflict erupted. They inherited the impressive works accomplished by his father and their colleagues. To this day, Korea has the highest percentage of Presbyterians of any nation in the world. At one early point in the war, the Chinese army had pushed down almost the whole length of the Korean Peninsula. Moffett and the other missionaries walked with the Koreans, trying to stay ahead of the soldiers. The able-bodied people did. The blind and the impaired did not. When the Chinese soldiers caught up to them, they began marching them into the sea. Moffett and his colleagues, who stayed behind with the lame, walked into the water with them. The Chinese waved at them not to do it. The missionaries stayed in the water. It was, as he wrote in his book, The Big Ask: How Presbyterian Missionaries Walked with the People, “The most frightening moment I have ever had. And that water was *cold*. I cannot be the only person who urinated on himself that day.”

One of Moffett's colleagues began praying out loud for the Lord to deliver the people. The prayers and the standoff lasted minutes (of course Moffett calls them “like hours”). Finally, the Chinese soldiers waved for them to come up out of the sea. They resumed walking south, because they did not know what else to do. Last week we heard Harriet Tubman's nickname: Moses. The Korean people started calling Sam Moffett Moses, too. In the Big Ask he wrote, “I accepted the name not with pride, but

with humility. God had chosen me to lead a small band of God's people.” Whether called to lead or to follow, we must trust that God *will* provide. Sometimes it does not look like God has, but usually in hindsight we can look back at a time of trial and make out at least a glimmering of what God was up to.

In any case, when God asks us to go somewhere, or to do something, we can despite whatever fears we may have. Because God asks us to go where we *need* to go. And God gets us there. Sooner or later, God gets us there. When we try to obey God, confess our failures, and then keep trying, God gets us there.