

Matthew 21: 23-32
Creekside COB
September 25, 2005

“Cutting in Line”

I learned a lesson in Kindergarten that stuck with me. *Don't cut in line.* The earlier this lesson is learned the better, because a substantial slice of life is spent waiting in lines of one sort or another. Nothing causes instant irritation as the person who decides to short cut the waiting process by cutting in ahead of us. Whether the person simply has no patience, or suffers from an illusion that his time is more important than others, no one likes a people who cut.

Returning from a Canadian fishing trip we were stuck in a two-mile long line backup at the border crossing. The cars inched along, and we settled in for the long wait. But some people decided to circumvent the wait by wedging in near the front with their big trucks and SUV's. Fortunately, the Ft. Frances, Ontario police were on the look out for these jokers. They ordered the cutters out of the line, gave them a ticket, and escorted them to the back of the line (just like in Kindergarten), much to the delight of those who were cut in front of. We were close enough to hear people cheering when the cutting culprits were caught. No one likes people who cut.

When the roll is called up yonder I'll be there. I don't know about the topography of up yonder. I don't know if there will be harps up yonder. I pray there are not. I'm don't know about heaven's landscape and music. I do know that Jesus said the road getting there is narrow. Does this infer there will be a single-file line waiting to get in? If the *Lord of All* meets us one at a time, it could be.

No one can say for sure, but one thing is for sure-- there will be surprises galore when we see who is in line. If today's scripture

is any indication, we're in for a shock when we see who is allowed to cut in ahead of us.

In our text, Jesus in a familiar place... in hot water. He had just made the palm-waving entry into Jerusalem. The very next thing he did was go to the Temple, drive out the money-changers, and disrupt commerce and worship. Sacrificial dove and lamb sales came to an abrupt halt. Jesus spent the night in Bethany, and returned to the Temple the next day. While he was teaching, the chief priests and elders came to him with a question. *"By what authority do you do these things, and who gave it to you?"*

You don't have to be a Bible scholar to know that Jesus rarely gave straight answers. *"By what authority do I do these things? Tell you what... I'll answer your question—when you answer mine."* He knew the best answers are not spoon fed, but are those we have to wrestle with on our own. Jesus asked, *"Where did John the Baptist get his authority, from God or men?"* The Pharisees knew that either way, there were had, so they pleaded ignorance... *"We don't know,"* they said. *"Then I won't tell you where I get my authority."* Next, he told them a story.

Before I tell you this story, I want you to hear a different version of it. There were two sisters who did baby-sitting in the neighborhood. A couple went out for the evening and hired the younger sister to watch their children. When they got home, they found the house trashed. The sitter was asleep on the couch. The children had not washed up or brushed their teeth before going to bed. Come morning, the children could hardly wait to tell the parents how wonderful the sitter was. She played with them, told them stories, ran races around the house with them, and helped them say their prayers at bedtime. The parents decided they would not ask to younger sister to help again.

On their next evening out, they hired the older sister. They returned to find the house neat and orderly, the children fast asleep, and the sitter studying her homework. She said the kids were delightful and there were no problems. They were so pleased they paid her more than they had agreed on. In the morning the parents asked the children how things had gone.

They said the sitter yelled at them all night using cuss words. She made them play outside after dark while she was on the phone with her boyfriend. She ordered them to bed early, invited her friends over, and they sat on the deck and smoked. Which sister would you want to watch your children?

“What do you think?” Jesus asked. “A man had two sons. He asked both to work for the day in the family vineyard. The first son said, ‘No way, Dad. Not today. My friends and I have other plans. Maybe the next time.’ After thinking about it, though, he changed his mind and went to the vineyard and did what he was asked. The man asked the second son to help. ‘No sweat, Dad. I’m glad to help,’ he said, but he never showed.” Jesus asked the Pharisees, “Which son did the will of his father?”

**It was a no-brainer. “The first one,” they said. “*Right you are!*” Jesus said. “And truly, truly I say to you, the tax collectors and prostitutes will go into the Kingdom of God ahead of you.”
OUCH!**

Put on a pair of Pharisee shoes and imagine how it felt. You’ve devoted your life to serving God. From the moment you wake in the morning until your head hits the pillow at night, you abide by the rules of righteousness and godliness. You believe the right things. You sign on to the right causes. You stick to the straight and narrow, and Jesus tells you, “The scum of society will cut in ahead of you at the line headed for the Kingdom.

Jesus didn’t say the riff-raff would gain admission *instead of* the Pharisees, but they would get there first. But it didn’t lessen the blow. The people who first rejected the message of John and Jesus had a change of heart. They repented and said yes to the life they had said, “No!” to. The Pharisees, said, “*Yes Lord, yes Lord, yes, yes, Lord,*” but when it came to **DOING something about it, their yes was a no in disguise.**

There are lots of people who don’t want anything to do with the church. It doesn’t mean they want nothing to do with Jesus. Their problem is not with him but his lip-service followers whose real service can’t be detected. It’s the old *hypocrite problem*.

“They go to church on Sunday. They’ll be all right come Monday. It’s just a little habit they’re acquired.”

This is the point at which we, with 2,000 years of hindsight, must fight the temptation to trash the Pharisees. We draw dismissive conclusions like, “They only cared about religious posturing.” Or, “It was all show.” The truth is, they believed what they believed *deeply*. They thought they were doing the right things, like you think you do the right things. Surface treatment misses the point, and it lets us off the hook far too easily.

Fish story and truth are not words used in the same sentence. I don’t understand all the dynamics of it, but fish stories are living, evolving organisms. Each time the story is told the fish gains a little girth and weight. The three minute fight becomes ten. In telling and retelling the story, it takes on a life of its own. The teller goes from an awareness of *slight* embellishment to actually believing everything he says. The story basics are all there. Something happened. A fish was involved, and was in fact, caught. After a while the story teller can no longer distinguish fact from inflation.

For the benefit of you *non-fishers*, recall something you’ve “thought of doing” for a friend. Life has gotten the best of them for some reason. You tell yourself you are going to *get in touch*. “I’ll pay a visit. If I haven’t enough time, I’ll give her a call... or at least I’ll send a card. She’ll appreciate it.” You tell yourself that you’ll *get around to it...* soon. You don’t forget. You really do think about the person. You know the kind of card you’ll send. You have a good idea what you would like to say. The intention rolls around in your mind like socks in the dryer and before long you imagine that you’ve done what you intended to do.

We believe that the link between thinking and acting is there, when in reality, it isn’t. As I reflect on this behavior it makes me realize that I have Pharisee blood in my family tree. So do you.

On my sabbatical I had the privilege of meeting David Redding, who, for the past forty years has pastured the Liberty Presbyterian Church in Delaware, Ohio. In addition to being a

great preacher, he is a well known, accomplished writer of over twenty books. He gave me a copy of one of his recent volumes and in it he describes the Achilles heel of Christians. He says: "One of the hazards of religious people is their tendency to put on weight around the temples." He goes on to observe:

Pride is the dragon mother that feeds predominantly on the religious. A profession of faith is a dangerous thing. In some ways it is safer to be a sinning nobody. God himself prefers the curses of the profane to the prayers of the pious braggart. Even thanks can be seduced by pride, as when the Pharisee prays, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men..."

This is the trouble that dogs the people mothers are so proud of. They think they're it. And that's what most of hell is made of—not just bad people, but people who think they're it.

A memory that inspired his observation came from a proper Sunday school teacher who first told him the story of the Pharisee and the sinner. With an attitude like Dana Carvey's "Church Lady," she said, "And thank God we're not like that Pharisee!" When we catch ourselves thinking this way, it's a reminder that there will be tax collectors and prostitutes cutting in line ahead of us.

Jesus exposes another one of our rationalizations. We are so good a drawing distinctions between those who are in and those who are not. Pay attention to how we define what we are by pointing to what others aren't.

"Compared to those people, I look pretty good." I'm not like those. One look at those people and I know that I'm tight with God.

On Thursday the Outreach Team was doing some "touch-up" editing to a great-looking brochure that Sabrina Fritz designed. Within the next month we will distribute copies of this "let us

introduce ourselves” brochure to homes in the vicinity of our new building. One editorial change was changing the heading, “Our Mission Statement,” and changing it to, “Our Mission.” A mission statement doesn’t accomplish anything. A mission does. And as we focus upon now and the immediate future, we’ve got to understand that a mission or vision statement isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on without people who will put legs and feet on it.

In the book, *Out of Africa*, Isak Dinesen tells the story of a boy named Kitau who appeared at her door and asked to work for her. She agreed, and he proved to be a wonderful servant. Three months later she was dismayed because he asked for a letter of recommendation to work for a Muslim Shiek in another region. She didn’t want to lose him and offered him a large raise, but he was insistent about leaving.

He told her that he would either become a Christian or a Muslim, and explained that his purpose in coming to live with her had been to see the behavior of Christians up close. He was going to work for the Sheik to observe how Muslims live. After experiencing both, he would make up his mind. Later she wrote: “I believe that even an Archbishop, when he had had these facts laid before him, would have said, or at least thought, as I said, ‘Good God Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here.’”

There's an old verse that goes, *"When all is said and done, more is said, than done."* It's not what we say that carries the day. We can talk till we're blue in the face about what we believe and why we believe it. At the end of the day, deeds and not words will have the final say. We can say to the Father, "Will I go work in the vineyard? I'd be delighted to. You can count on me. I'm not like those people who refuse to serve you."