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How Much Room?
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How much room is there in heaven and in God's Kingdom of Heaven? During this pandemic we have to worry a lot about how much room there is. We have to worry about how many beds our local hospitals have, and how many ventilators. We have to worry about how many people can fit in a space while social distancing and how far apart they need to be and how long they can be in one space. One of the reasons we are meeting outside for worship on Sunday mornings is because there is more room outside than there is inside so people can be even farther than six feet away from others if that makes them feel more comfortable. The reason we worry about how much room is available is because one way we can reduce the risk of transmission of the COVID 19 virus is to not have too many people too close together for too long, especially inside. While it seems contrary to how we've always done things, the pandemic has changed how we do hospitality and how we think about how much room is available all while trying to continue to live into our beliefs.

It's one of the tragedies of this virus, because the Love of God is love that always makes room, and that is one of the big challenges for churches like ours who are trying to be responsible as we return to in-person parish life; to continue to be welcoming without putting each other in harm's way. We want to do everything we can to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus while exemplifying the love of God in Christ that makes room. Even in the parable in today's Gospel, Jesus showed there is always room in God's kingdom, even for those who choose to reject it.

The section of Matthew's Gospel for today comes after events in Jesus' life we usually read during Holy Week: Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and Jesus' clearing out the temple. These two actions got people's attention, and that is what prompted the question of the religious leaders about who did Jesus think he was doing things like that? That's my interpretation of the question of authority the religious leaders asked Jesus.

It is easy to get caught up in the politics of this part of the Gospel and pick sides. The religious leaders are the bad guys who can't recognize the Messiah in their midst, or perhaps they do and don't like the changes he brought, turning their system of power and authority upside down. And Jesus is the hero whose authority and power is the love of God that brings healing and restoration to the world. It is

easy to admire the author of this Gospel writing this account in a way that makes Jesus look like a brilliant master of debate, answering the religious leaders' question with a question of his own that exposes their fear and intentions to make Jesus look bad. To drive his point home, Jesus told the parable about two sons: both do the opposite of what they say they are going to do, but it wasn't their words that exposed their obedience, it was their actions. Even the religious leaders had to admit the son who did what his father asked even though he said no when his father asked is the righteous one. Actions, I'm sure you've heard it said, speak louder than words.

Cleverly, Jesus exposed the religious leaders' hypocrisy that they have said they believe in God and the Messiah, but their actions show they fail to recognize Jesus. Because of this, Jesus said, tax collectors and prostitutes – people whose way of making a living is contrary to God's laws in the Torah - will enter heaven before the religious leaders because they changed their ways and believed after experiencing John the Baptist's baptism or Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing. They were the ones who noticed Jesus' words and actions are the same.

While it is fashionable to look at this like a debate and hail Jesus as the winner and make all kinds of jokes about the losers on Facebook, turning this part of Matthew's Gospel into what is socially fashionable misses a subtle point Jesus made in his remarks to the religious leaders. He said that those who changed - the tax collectors and prostitutes - will enter heaven *before* the religious leaders. Notice he didn't say the religious leaders were beyond God's grace and wouldn't ever be in heaven. Apparently, there is room in heaven even for those who are slower to recognize God's love and change. Apparently, there is no one who is beyond God's saving grace. That is the authority Jesus has: that of God, the love and grace that makes room for all God's children, even those who try and trap him with questions.

That is the good news of salvation, and good news for us as individuals and as a church who follow Jesus today and try to work toward God's kingdom of heaven here on earth. Because while we want to be the good guys, we religious people might have more in common with those religious leaders than we might want to admit. Especially when it comes to having to make changes that make room for the Holy Spirit's guidance. We religious people can be terribly guilty of resisting change, even when it is Spirit driven, because, well, we've always done things certain ways. And we tend to be more comfortable with our own authority of the way things have always been done instead of turning to God's authority that is embodied by love and healing that makes room.

The reason why hospitality looks different for us during the pandemic is we are trying to be like Jesus; we are changing our actions so that they match our words of commitment to follow Jesus and intentionally do no harm to anyone else, which means during this period of time doing what we can to prevent people from getting sick. That some folks will be slower to adapt to these changes can be frustrating, but it might help us to remember change is slow for some and try and make room for ways to help everyone make these changes like learning about the virus and how it spreads, understanding the rules and why mask wearing, staying six feet apart, doing what we can outside and limiting our time together can help reduce the spread of the virus while enabling us to continue to do the practices that help us and our neighbors like worship in-person, give away free lunch, and have our coffee shop ministry open.

Remembering that Jesus makes room even for those who tried to trap him might also help us to resist the temptation to demonize or belittle someone who has different views than we do. It can be hard to realize that people we can't stand are still beloved by God and Jesus will make room for them. One of the most powerful truths of God's love is God's love is so vast there is room for all of us to change so that our words and actions reflect not our selfish desires, but God's desire for us and all the world.

Today's Gospel is the reminder there is room for all of us to change, to listen for the ways God is calling us to be the church in these times when there is so much uncertainty, fear, selfishness; where racism and sexism seem to be getting worse. That is why it is so important to hear the hope in today's Gospel that God's love in Christ makes room for us all, makes room for us to turn away from our selfishness and fears and cynicism and turn toward God's desires for us which begins by recognizing every human being is lovingly made in God's image and therefore capable of showing God's love to the world in both word and action. That is how hope can shine through all the uncertainty, fears, and selfishness in the world to show the way for others to join us in making room for Jesus in our hearts and in the world. How much room is there in heaven and in God's kingdom of Heaven? The answer: There is always room for one more.