

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost. The scripture text is taken from Matthew 21:23-32

I find it amazing, that some astronomers, gazing into the night-time sky through a telescope, looking into the vast universe, would find it impossible to believe in God.

After all, they more than anyone else would understand the vastness of space and the intricate balance that keeps it all in place.

Likewise, I find it amazing, that some scientists gazing through a microscope, staring into a world invisible to the naked eye, the infinitesimal, would find it impossible to believe in God.

How could a scientist, who understands the complex laws of nature which govern the world, and the delicate and well-maintained order of all things, not accept that these designs, were created by the designer of the cosmos?

How could anyone who sees a newborn baby, who comes equipped with sight, hearing, the sensation of touch, a skeletal system, a circulatory system, a respiratory system, a brain, and so much more, all of which is completely integrated to work as a whole, not believe that this was a purposeful act of the Creator?

How could this be by accident, or random chance, even over the course of millions of years? It would be like saying, "Let's do this, let's put a group of monkeys in a room, let's give them computers, and eventually over time, they will be able to compose such great literary works, like that of Shakespeare. That makes no sense.

How could anyone, watch a beautiful sunrise or sunset, or take a simple walk into the woods, or walk along a mountain trail, or walk along the seashore, with all the wonder of creation, and not lift up their heart in praise to God?

For me, this kind of unbelief takes much more faith than believing in God and what His Word says about Him, creating the world and all that is in it. But unbelief is a stubborn thing. It has to be, because it is a denial of the obvious.

Furthermore, how can you live through each day and not believe in the meaning and the purpose of life?

How can you believe that your body is simply a machine made by chance in an empty universe, so that there is no purpose for your life?

How could you believe there is no love, only a combination of chemicals which affect the brain to make it seem like love?

And, more than that, there are those who say that you are controlled by those chemicals which work on the brain, and therefore, you are predetermined to act the way you do, for good or for ill.

And so, you are not responsible for your behavior. We are merely fleshy machines living on this planet which is itself a vast machine, and all that there is, is the material (the physical) universe and the material (the physical) world we live in.

How different this is from the Christian faith, that says that our ordered world was created, not just by an impersonal force, an unknown Designer at work in the universe, but a personal God who created the world in love, who loves you and I, and God wants you to not only know His grace, but to experience His grace.

Woody Allan, a notorious atheist once said: "It's hard for me to enjoy anything, because I am aware how transient things are... Yes, there are times when you think 'My God, life is sweet, it's nice and thoughts of mortality are in absence. You know, watching the Marx Brothers, or Knicks game, or listening to jazz, you get a great feeling of ecstasy. But then it passes and the dark reality of life starts to creep back in."

Folks, that's the way life is, for those who do not believe in a God who has created the universe and this world, and all that it is in it.

That's the way it is for those who do not believe in a God, who loves you so much that He would send His only Son into this world, and die for you on a cross, so that your sins would be forgiven and that you would be with Him in heaven for all eternity.

Now I say all of this as a backdrop to our scripture reading for today, taken from Matthew's Gospel. The religious leaders of Jesus' day are full of unbelief and are in denial of the obvious.

In fact, they (the religious leaders) absolutely refused to believe in Jesus, no matter how much evidence there was. God in the flesh was staring them right in the face, yet they asked Jesus (this is in verse 23), "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?"

They (the religious leaders) denied that He (Jesus) was from God, much less that He was God in the flesh.

In verse 24, Jesus said: "I will also ask you one question: if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

That was brilliant, because John had said that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and that He was the Lamb of God, who had come to take away the sin of the world.

What more authority could you have? If they believed that John the Baptist's ministry and words were from heaven, there would be no question about His authority. But they did not.

They (the religious leaders) were caught in a bind. They wrangled among themselves saying (this is in verse 25) "From heaven, he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'"

In verse 26, "But if we say, 'Of human origin' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

The religious leaders even admit, that they did not believe John the Baptist. Michael Ignatieff, in his book, "The Needs of Strangers", says: "What a man does not want to believe, he can find a way to deny."

And that is the way it is. So they answered Jesus (this is in verse 27), "We don't know". And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

Why not? Because they had already been told and they would not believe it, and Jesus knew they would not believe it, even if he told them again, and again and again.

In verse 28, Jesus told them a parable: "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today. He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same, and he answered, I go sir'; but he did

not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you."

So why did Jesus say, the (the tax collectors, the prostitutes, in other words those sinners on the fringes of society, the worst of the worst) would enter the kingdom of God ahead of the good religious folk, who knew the Torah, and all the rules and regulations that went along with it, who gave their tithe to the temple, who worshiped in Temple going through their rituals without missing a beat, who strived to work for a life of righteousness, and did all the right things in accordance with the Law of Moses. That, just makes no sense.

So Jesus continues on verse 32: "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

So when these sinners believed John, they repented and were baptized, they entered the kingdom of heaven ahead of the Pharisees, who did not believe in John's message, and balked at it!

The lowest of sinners believed and repented, but those who were steeped in the Scriptures did not believe.

The religious leaders claimed that they obeyed God and went into his field, but in reality they did not. Meanwhile, the sinners who at first, rebelled against God, changed their minds, obeyed and did God's bidding.

They actually went into the vineyard before the religious leaders who were still standing outside the gate. It was a shocking reversal.

And those who claimed to be following God appeared to be going into the vineyard, but they never went.

Those who appeared to be far from God, were now actually carrying out his will and doing his work. A Russian novelist once asked: "Can man be good without God?" And that really is the question. Being religious is not enough, as Jesus parable clearly points out.

Some of you may recall the stories of some of the religious leaders in our country and in our time, whose lives were full hypocrisy, and lies.

Some of us remember the 1980's and 1990's when we heard names like Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, Ted Haggard, and Robert Tilton. Those TV evangelists gave Christianity a black-eye.

What appears to be is not always what is. Those who appear to be working for God and living for Him are not always the ones who are.

Those who appear to be far from God are not always as far as they seem. Jesus' words ring true: "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (Matthew 19, verse 30)

Jesus warned: "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them." (Matthew 23:13)

Sometimes it can all be pretense. Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." (Mark chapter 7, verse 6)

OK, so what does all of this mean? You see, this is the problem: We (as human-beings) see this whole thing about God as a matter of keeping the rules, in other words, what is called “works-righteousness”.

If I just do the right thing, if I live a good-life, if I don't break any rules, if I am nice to my neighbor most of the time, if I attend church on Sunday, most of the time, and if I just put a few dollars in the offering plate, I will be good to go! God's gotta love me, because I am not like those other folks out there, you know, the derelicts, those who don't attend church on Sunday, those who ride motorcycles, those who hang out at the local bar, those who get into trouble, and those who are just all around bad people.

What we fail to see is that God wants to have a relationship with us, more than anything else, even if we haven't kept the rules. We wouldn't get into God's good favor even if we could keep all the rules. We can't keep all the rules, or earn favor with God. We are so much like the second Son in the parable

If you don't remember anything else I have said today, remember this: God is a God of grace, God loves you and I more than we will ever know. God doesn't need our works righteousness, what God wants is your heart. God wants you to walk by faith in Him.

Understand, there is no forgiveness of sins without a relationship with God. Forgiveness is only something that opens the way to coming to God and having a relationship with Him. And that relationship with God comes by the work of God through His Son, Jesus the Christ.

God gave His Son to die in our place, to forgive us of our sins, because we cannot atone for our sins, we cannot pay the debt of sin, only God in Christ can. The blood-stained cross and the empty tomb testify to it.

Those who seek God, turn to Him, worship Him, and walk by faith in Him, because our sins are forgiven, will not only enter the vineyard, but will do so joyfully.

Those who see it only as a matter of keeping the rules do not enter the vineyard, because they can always find ways around the rules.

The Pharisees had reduced God to a set of rules, so that they no longer saw Him (God) as “Father”, they saw God as a deity to be pleased. In other words do this or that, God will be pleased, Or, do this or that, and you're going to get it, but not in a good way!

No wonder they could not accept Jesus for who He was. It was God who gave Jesus His authority.

As I close out the message for today, the world, and we who live in this world, were created by a God who loves you and would send His only Son into this world (even if you were the only person in this world) to die for you, so that you would live with God in heaven for all eternity.

You and I were born, not to just believe in God, but to love Him, worship Him, serve Him, and live in a relationship with Him. This is the sum of all of our life and faith. Amen.

Let us pray:

Loving God, You created us in your image, and you have called us into a relationship with You through faith in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Be with us in our walk of faith, strengthen us in our faith and

help us to be the people you have called us to be. All these things, we humbly pray; In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.