

**Rev. Pierce Todd Withers, Deacon
Sermon for St. John's
September 27, 2026**

Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "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?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"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. 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."

SERMON

**Gracious and upright is the LORD;
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.
He guides the humble in doing right
and teaches his way to the lowly.**

In the name of the FATHER,
 And the SON,
 And the HOLY SPIRIT,
 Amen.

Please be seated.

Good Morning St. John's!

@ 9:00 AM: and a special welcome to those of you joining us online.

My, how time flies when you're having fun!

It's hard to believe that I'm in my final month
 As transitional deacon at St. John's
 And that in just a few weeks -
 God willing and the people consenting -
 I'll be ordained to the priesthood!

During my time at St. John's
 I've been focused on Liturgical Formation,
 And, attempting to answer the question
 that Fr. Lonnie posed to me:

**“What is God doing in the Liturgy,
 and how do priests and deacons
 faithfully steward and participate in that work?”**

Liturgy, translated from the Greek,
 simply means the “work of the people.”

When we gather as Episcopalians,
 as workers in the Vineyard of Our Lord,
 we encounter the Risen Christ
 in God's Word proclaimed,
 and when we partake of the Heavenly Banquet
 at the Communion rail.

This isn't just an reenactment of an ancient ritual
 although the Eucharist is at the core
 of what it means to be an Episcopalian.
 Liturgy is nothing less than participation in the Divine Life.
 It is through the Sacraments of Word and Table,
 that our spirits are nourished and strengthened,
 to Bring the Love of Christ to a broken world.

Before we dive into this morning's passage from Matthew,
 I want to "set the stage" and provide a little context

There are 3 Vineyard parables in Matthew's Gospel

1. The Parable of the Workers,
 Which Deacon Melanie preached on last week
2. The Parable of the Two Sons
 That we hear this morning

AND

3. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants
 Spoiler alert: This is our Gospel for next week!

These Vineyard Parables

Are metaphors

for life in the Household of God.

Last Sunday, Jesus teaches the Parable of the Workers,
 as he wraps up his ministry in Judea,
 moving ever closer to Jerusalem,
 and his Cross awaits.

Along the way, Jesus continues to teach and heal,
 and foretell his death and resurrection
 to disciples who still do not comprehend
 what must come to pass.

Matthew 21 begins with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem,
with the crowds shouting,
“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!

But, despite his hero's welcome,
and to everyone's amazement,
Jesus stirs up quite a ruckus in the Temple Courts,
turning over the tables of the money changers,
further provoking the chief priests and elders.

This morning, our Gospel
begins with the the chief priests and elders
approaching Jesus with a question
meant to trap him.

But, their plan backfires.

They become trapped in their own web
When Jesus responds with a question of his own.

The Temple leaders are fearful of the crowd,
and avoid answering when Jesus
who inquires about the authority of John the Baptizer.

This fear the crowd is a foreshadowing of things to come:
The same crowd will demand that Jesus be executed
in just a matter of days,
and a timely reminder that whipping up crowds with fear
is always a dangerous business.

In response the chief priests and elders,
Jesus teaches a second Vineyard Parable
about the Two Sons who are asked by their Father
to go into the fields to work.

One son says “no,”
but later changes his mind
and ends up working in the vineyard.
Jesus makes it clear that this son is like
the “publicans and the harlots”
as the Authorized Version calls them,
who hear John the Baptizer’s call for repentance,
And turn towards God.

The other son says “yes” to working in the vineyard
but never actually goes into his Father’s fields.
This son is like the Temple leaders,
who talk a good game,
but fail to head John the Baptizer’s message.

Rather than humble themselves before God,
The chief priests and elders love to sit in places of honor,
And lord their power over others.

And, Jesus is not having any of it.

During Jesus’ last visit to the Temple,
He lowers the boom on the religious officials
whom he will call in the coming pages
“blind guides” and “hypocrites.”

Do as they say,
he tells his disciples,
but not as they do.

Friends, what the chief priests and the elders lack,
is some good-old fashioned humility.

They have forgotten the words of the Psalmist
we hear this morning:

**7 Gracious and upright is the LORD; *
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.**

**8 He guides the humble in doing right *
and teaches his way to the lowly.**

God guides the humble in doing right,
and teaches the lowly.

When I was preparing my sermon for this morning,
I started thinking about my lifelong friends here at St. John's.
Some of you have had a front row seat
for watching my journey to the priesthood.

I am sure that there are more than a few who
were surprised when they heard I was going off the seminary.

When I was a young man,
I was floundering around a bit,
having a lot of fun but not accomplishing much.
This was quite concerning to my Mother.

@ 9:00 AM - Hi Mom!

She sent me off to a testing center near New York City,
that offered cutting-edge aptitude and vocational exams,
designed to help me find my place in the world.
Some weeks later,
I returned to receive my results.

"Pierce," they said,
"The vocation that you scored the highest on is for ministry."
I just looked at them with a blank stare.
After a few moments of stunned silence I blurted out,
"I'm not doing that!"
"What's the next highest score?"

It seems that my Father has been calling me
to go into the Vineyard for a very long time.

When the time came to finally answer God's call,
like the first Son in our parable this morning,
I got in line with the tax collectors and prostitutes.

What I can tell you is that,
While I really don't regret too much of my mis-spent youth,
I did have a lot of fun,
I also don't miss it.

When I humbled myself before God,
I began to understand the true meaning of joy.
When I finally entered the Vineyard,
I found the love,
and the peace,
and the grace,
that I had been searching for all along.

This morning, as I stand in this storied pulpit,
as I look out as all of you,
I truly **am** humbled.

Humbled by the love and grace that you have shown to me,
humbled by the warm St. John's hospitality
that is at the bedrock of this place.

Thank you.

Now, you might think this would be
a good place to end my sermon,
but since I am only up to bat this one time,
and Fr. Lonnie isn't here,
I want to return for a moment to
the Parable of the Two Sons.

Yes, there is the Son who says “no” to God
but later changes his mind.

And, yes, there is also the son who says “yes” to God
but doesn’t actually follow through with any action.

But, there is a third Son in the story,
the Son who is teaching the parable.
Jesus.

This Son knows a thing or two about
humbling one’s self and answering God’s call.
This Son doesn’t hesitate or offer inaction.
This Son is completely obedient to the Master of the Vineyard.

As Paul writes to the Philippians,
we do well to pattern our own work in the Vineyard after him:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth
and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Friends, when we humble ourselves,
When we pattern our lives after Jesus,
we become teachable.

And, we discover the truest thing about ourselves:

That we are God's beloved children.
So, come early to the Vineyard, if you can,
But arriving late is okay, too.

When we go into the Vineyard,
We do the "work of the people."
And then, we share the love and grace
That we find here with the world,
That needs it desperately.
Along the way,
we find our lives' purpose and meaning.

Here, in the Vineyard,
we learn that God:
guides the humble in doing right
and teaches God's ways to the lowly.

AMEN.