



## ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

### Sermon by Pastor Jami Anderson, September 25, 2011

I've been wondering about why those tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of me? I think the key has to do with something about their attitude to authority. Perhaps they've learned that they have very little authority and it is no use pretending that they do. Perhaps they have little to lose and nothing to prove. So, they are willing to look and listen and discern where the right authority might be found and followed. Like believing in John the Baptist for instance.

For after all, Jesus told the parable of the sons in the vineyard as part of his response to the question about his authority. He's entered the temple grounds shortly before his arrest and crucifixion. He has been out and about doing stuff – healing and teaching and healing and teaching. And the people who have the perceived authority in that arena – the chief priests and elders are notably concerned about someone usurping their power, their role and teachers and healers. Who, they wanted to know, did Jesus think he was?

But he doesn't answer them directly does he? He does something that throws the priests and elders off track and his story can do the same to us. Because he tells the simple story about the sons being asked to work in the vineyard. And one says he will not and then does, and one says he will but then doesn't. And Jesus asks which did the will of the father. The answer is pretty straightforward, isn't it? We get it – the priests and elders got it. The first son did the will of the father, but how does that bring in tax collectors and prostitutes and how does that answer the questions about authority?

So, I've been thinking about those tax collectors and prostitutes. What do they get that I don't get? Are they somehow related to the son who gives the grumbly answer and then does the work the Father requested? And can't I be in the same category as them?

And that brings to mind the years I spent hanging around prostitutes and tax collectors and what I learned from them. Well, I don't know how many of them were actually prostitutes and tax collectors but they may be our modern day representatives of those folks. I met them around the tables of open AA meetings. By and large, these were people not accorded much public authority or respect. They had traded that pathway away as their addictions pulled them into black pits of self-loathing and despair. And now here they were, committed to living a new way, a way that required of them obedience to another power, a higher power, a power that was not them.

I must tell you that I learned so much from the people at those 12 step meetings. I must tell you that I think my own working of the twelve step program did much to work out my own salvation

with fear and trembling. I learned humility, I learned patience, I learned a new level of honesty. I learned about daily reliance on God and God's guidance. I learned to live with gratitude and acceptance. I learned a deep level of respect for the people downtrodden and dismissed in the realms of authority within our culture.

In fact, I would go do far as to say, I met a true and living church community at the AA meetings. But they might not tell you that. Far from it – in nearly all of their stories they spoke of hurt and anger and distance from established churches and denominations. They talked about being judged, rejected, treated coldly in their struggles. By and large, these hurting folks had no use for the “organized” church.

But by turning their lives over to a higher power, to God, they had learned to get through each day with actions that were directed by that higher power. They had already taken the step of admitting that they couldn't get through life on their own strength or decision making. That step of humility and honesty opened them up to paying attention to where true power came from. They got it. They paid attention. There was no level of showmanship in their lives – it was gone.

Why do I remember those wonderful and courageous people this day? Perhaps because I see the gift of 12 steps programs as changing the world for good. Perhaps because I see their actions as a challenge to those of us who can look good on the outside and rely on that veneer to obtain worldly comforts. Perhaps because I appreciate that they get it. Perhaps because I am truly glad that they will get into the kingdom of God before those of us who continue to rely on our own power and misplaced authority.

Because the truth of the matter is – By whose authority? God and only God's.

Thanks be to God.