

We're going to start a little differently this morning. When you came in today, you were handed a sheet of paper. For the next couple of minutes, here is what you're going to do. You're going to honestly and openly write down on that paper the things that you think Jesus and our faith calls us to do in the world. This is for you only, so no one is going to check your work, which should hopefully allow you to write from the heart. When you think about Jesus' call to us as modern day disciples, as you think about what it means to be a person of faith in America in 2023, what do you think that entails? What is the gospel call for us, right here, right now? Take a couple of minutes and write those things down.

Ok, got your list? Now we're going to take another couple of minutes and you're going to look at that list and you're going to circle or check off the things on that list you're actually willing to do. We've made these lists of what we think, what we know in our heart of hearts is where Jesus is calling us today, but now we're going to get to the heart of the matter. Are we willing to do those things? So take a couple of minutes and again, openly and honestly, check off the things Jesus calls us to that you're actually willing to do.

Now, here's the thing, there were two ways to go about this. One was the easy way...you look at the list, shrug, and circle everything, because

we're talking about Jesus and the call of our faith so do we really want to say there are things we aren't willing to do? The other way...the hard way, the realistic, open and honest way, was to admit within our heart of hearts that there are things we wrote down that we *know* are what Jesus calls us to and yet we're either not particularly interested in doing them, we're afraid to do them, we think we're incapable of doing them, or we just think they aren't that important. So, keep that list handy and let's dive into our lessons this morning, because there's a lot going on.

At the core, the heart of the lessons today is one simple idea: what is it in your power to do with your life, your faith? What are you capable of doing? What are you willing to do? And different groups go at it different ways, but let's start with our beloved, messy Israelites in Ezekiel. These are a people who have been in exile in Babylon for a hefty amount of time by now. Some of them may not even have conscious memory of a time when they lived in Israel, the Temple and worship life there is merely a concept not a concrete image in their mind. And frankly...they're starting to get ticked off. This new generation looks at God and looks at Ezekiel, God's messenger and says ya know what, this is ridiculous. Who knew God was so unfair? We're still here, *stuck* in this godforsaken land, all because *our parents* screwed up! All they can do is point their fingers backwards into

the past and say, we're being held here on account of their sins, this has nothing to do with us, how dare you be so unfair as to treat us this way!

Ezekiel is *super uninterested* in this version of excuses. He brings the word of God that basically says, stop, just stop. God's ways aren't unfair, you're operating with an immensely skewed perspective that wants nothing to do with accountability. Yes, the sins of your ancestors are what brought you here, but what is keeping you here is a continued lack of connection with God, a visioning for who you want to be, for what this relationship can be once again. Ezekiel tells them that the future is there for the taking, God is there with a willingness to connect, but they have to see out a new spirit and a new heart. They have the ability to make new choices, they just have to do it! Instead of constantly pointing fingers and saying, this is all *their* fault and not recognizing how their lives and faith have contributed to where they currently are. They are so convinced that they can't change, that their fate is sealed because of the past, their own and that of their ancestors, and yet God stands before them and says there can be a new way.

Fast forward a few hundred years, and we find ourselves in the temple with Jesus and the Jewish authorities. Jesus is probably a little bit short of breath as he has just flipped over the money changers tables and cleansed the temple courtyard, and now he has to deal with the machinations of those in

power. They try to trip him up with baseless questions about John and his ministry and Jesus just doesn't have time for that. Instead he tells them a parable, a parable of two sons, one of whom tells his father he won't go work in the vineyard and then later is like, ya know, I probably should go work in the vineyard, and the other of whom says oh yeah, I'm on my way there now, and then doesn't go. Jesus wants to know which of them did their father's will. They can't help but answer the first, the one who initially said no and then turned around and listened.

Jesus' point to them is that they are the second son, proclaiming that they follow God, love God, want nothing more than to do God's will and then they don't do it, they instead follow their own whims and desires, content to stay snuggled in their power. The people Jesus has called, sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, *they* are the first son. They're the ones who at first rejected God's call on their lives and then turned around and were like, I can do this, I want to do this. Not beholden to their past or blaming others for their situation, but taking their life and their faith in their own hands and doing something about it. The authorities are in the exact same spot as the exiles, we're in this situation because this is what we've always done and nothing can change it and we're just going to stay stuck here instead of hearing God's word and changing. The people who are

really and truly following Jesus, following God's call are those who look at their past actions, the world they lived in, and turn around, and say, I can do something different, I can change this, I can answer God's call on my life.

When we read parables like these, we so desperately want to convince ourselves that we are the first son, that sometimes we are a little hesitant about where God is calling us, but ultimately we get there and we follow. When we read lessons like Ezekiel, we want to believe we aren't like *those people*, blaming the past for where we are now. We want to believe we're forging our own path in our faith and as the church. Yet...let's go back to that list we made earlier. All those things that we know God calls us to and all those things we are resistant to, all those things we don't want to do even when we know God is calling us in that direction? We, more often than not, are the second son, are the Israelites raging in exile that none of this is our fault, we're only here because our past brought us here.

How many of us put loving our neighbors on our list of things God calls us to, and yet deep down we know that we won't do it, not if that neighbor is a person of color or a Republican or a Democrat or trans or poor or well the list could go on and on. How many of us put welcoming our neighbors on our list, and yet deep down know that when the RIC committee presents, we ignore them, when a visitor comes in we don't say anything to

them, when it feels like different people could change our communities we don't want any part of it? How many of us put speaking out for injustice on our list and yet we know exactly how we react when we watch the news, if people aren't protesting or speaking out in the exact way that we think they should, well then they're just an angry mob doing more harm than good and no one is going to listen to people yelling anyway. When we are open and honest with ourselves, we know that a massive amount of the things that we say we believe when we're here, things we say we're called to when we're here, get ignored when we leave. Yes, yes, God, I will love my neighbors and forgive and welcome your people...and then we go about our business and nothing has changed in our lives.

The same goes for us as the church. We look around and maybe we're frustrated at where we are, but rather than confronting our own actions, asking our own tough questions about where our priorities lie and just why we want to be here and dedicate our hearts to an active faith, we blame the past. Covid is why things are the way they are. *All those other people* who changed over the last few years, they're the problem. Twenty years ago this and this happened or was like this and here we are. We never want to confront what we ourselves, right here, right now can and should do about our own situation, content to point the fingers backwards so we don't

have to do the hard work of pointing the fingers at our own hearts and asking why am I a person of faith, a member of a church in the first place?

Someone in Bible study said something deeply profound this week, they said, “Life is hard, but it’s not confusing.” We try our ardent best to make life, faith, who we are as the church confusing, because it gives us an excuse for our complacency. Who God calls us to be, who we want to be as a community of faith that is growing and thriving and active isn’t confusing, but it is hard, it takes hard work and hard decisions. To live into those lists we made, it’s not confusing, more of often than not the gospel is pretty clear cut on who we are called to be, but it is hard. Loving our neighbors, being God’s hands in the world, it’s hard. So at this point it’s kind of up to us. Will we do the hard things, putting in the work and the effort to live out our faith and grow our community or will we say yes, yes Jesus we’ll get right on that and then leave here, forgetting it all, and when confronted just point our finger at someone else and say, this wasn’t my fault, it was theirs. It’s a hard choice, not a confusing one, but hard...

Take a look at your list...and ask yourself...who do you want to be?

AMEN!!!