

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 21:23-32

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Now, I'm an Arkansas Razorbacks fan. This may be why I am so familiar with suffering - I was trained from an early age to get my hopes way up high and then learned how to cope with the lows of disappointment most Saturdays every Fall. See, I'd hitched my own emotional well-being to those Hogs, and how I felt for the rest of the day was dependent on how they played. I'd soar on the highs of a good performance, and I'd sulk for hours when yet another SEC team did what other SEC teams do. It's funny, for the longest time, those football games on Saturday afternoons were just about the only place I'd see men show emotion. Sitting on the couch, surrounded by mountains of tortilla chips paired with only the finest of velveeta dips, my uncles and dad and brothers-in-law would leap with joy, holler in frustration, and yes, even weep. It was college football that taught me that tears could mean more than sadness or hurt feelings. Tears could also mean your team had just clinched the SEC West Championship with a 31-yard touchdown pass into double coverage against your bitter rivals from Louisiana.

I love a good rivalry. But lately I've been thinking about how rivalry thinking gets us going in two directions at the same time. On the one hand, we become more and more proud of our own team, slapping Razorbacks or Raiders on caps, t-shirts, dog collars, and anything else that'll sit still long enough to show our pride. And that's great. It's a good and joyful thing to be proud of where you're from and who you root for. But the flip side is what our pride for our side does to our consideration of the other side. I'm thinking of my younger cousin. It must've been around Thanksgiving when he was about 10 or 11. Arkansas had lost to the Florida Gators the week before, and my stepdad is a proud University of Florida alum. No fewer than five minutes after we'd arrived, my cousin noticed the blue and orange logo on my stepdad's shirt, and he erupted. His little face turned bright red, and he yelled about how much he HATED Florida, and then he had to go sit outside just to cool off. It took about nineteen slices of pumpkin pie for him to come back to earth, but even then, he kept on giving my stepdad the evil eye.

I bring all this up because, much as I love my Razorbacks, and much as I root for them to triumph over any foe that dares set foot on the gridiron against them, I know just how easy it is to fall into that toxic us-versus-them mindset. I know just how easy it is to think I know all there is to know about a person because they wear an Arkansas cap, and even more so, to think I know all there is to know about a person wearing an LSU cap. But life, and rivalry, and difference is so much more complicated than that easy and simple approach. Did you know that some LSU fans go to church? I know, I found this hard to believe, too, but they do. Some of them are even Episcopalian!

In all seriousness, all this talk about difference and what we assume we know about folks that are different from us, believe something different, or do something different for a living pops up right there at the end of Jesus' parable in Matthew. The chief priests and the elders know just exactly what the Messiah is supposed to look like, and it's not Jesus. In a typical meeting between the rivals, the chief priests and the elders try to trip Jesus up, and he deftly maneuvers out of the trap they set for him. But then he lays a parable at their feet to make a greater point. It's not about the folks who say they'll serve God and don't; it's about the folks who don't say they'll serve God but then do. Shockingly, even the tax collectors and the prostitutes that believe are living right, even they will enter the Kingdom of God before you who think you are righteous.

As a chief priest of sorts, you might imagine how hard it is to hear all this, but I think that's the point. The faithful and those in charge should feel the hair raise on the back of our necks when Jesus starts talking like this. Because he's talking to people like us. The folks gathered in the Temple know the rivalry they participate in with the world. They know the godly come here, while the secular world goes off and does whatever it is that it does, which we all know isn't holy, so we all know they're bad folks. Jesus knows that shorthand neural pathway and turns it on its head. Who's worse according to these folks than tax collectors and prostitutes? No

one could imagine one of them having a shred of faith, not to mention being better off in God's eyes than those gathered at the Temple.

I think Jesus' argument works on one level to show just how low the People of God had gotten, how distant from truly following the Law God had given them. Maybe he's saying y'all are worse even than *them*. But I'm much more interested in the other level Jesus is getting at. That maybe, just maybe, *them* aren't as bad as the good people of faith think. Matthew himself was a tax collector that followed Jesus. Tamar, Rahab, and a steady stream of unnamed prostitutes pop up all over scripture as paragons of faith. And yet, the rivalry between people of faith and folks like *them* runs so deep, that the People of God are blind to their value.

It actually makes me think about us, now, in a society so bifurcated we can't even make a choice between an iPhone or an Android without sparking an argument about who's the idiot and who's the sheep. Or how quick we are to dismiss people through character assassination or cancel culture. Did you know, right after George Floyd's death, a bevy of news articles appeared reporting that he had been a porn star, as if to say his murder was acceptable because he was one of *them*. Look, I don't know if that little tidbit is even true, but it shouldn't even matter; if we take Jesus' old words and bring 'em forward, even a porn star who believes in God will enter the Kingdom of God before the rest of us. This is shocking stuff, people. But it's so tempting to take the neural shortcut. We are faithful people, we know that. And we know that there are people that don't move in the world like we do. It's easy to assume that that means that they aren't faithful because they don't do what we do. It's so easy, and especially when sides are pitted one against the other, it's so tempting to know that we have the right of it, and therefore, they don't. It's fine to be proud of who you are, what team you cheer for, what horse you bet on, that's fine. But don't for a moment assume that means that you are closer to God because of the sign in your front lawn.

Paul says we ought to, in our humility, regard others as better than ourselves. Even those we all know, as a cultural shorthand, are at the bottom of the faithful pile. Even Antifa and QAnon followers believe. Even Democrats and Republicans believe. Even LSU fans, so I'm told, believe. To be clear, this doesn't mean you shouldn't stand for your faith and your beliefs. But it does mean you should stand for them without toxicity or judgment. People you love believe, and so do people you'd never want to be seen with in public. It's why we can say, in the words of our psalm, "Let none who look to you be put to shame, but let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes." Cheer for your side, hold that pride with humility and compassion, and pray that what is right will come.