

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ  
September 28, 2008  
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Scripture: Matthew 21:23-32 and Philippians 2:1-13

Sermon Title: "Dancing Together: Humility and Authority"

(open with prayer)

The church is kind of like a junior high dance. You have to go. Everyone is there. You sit next to your friends, but there is rarely any dancing going on. Did you ever wonder why they call it a dance? Wouldn't they get much more out of the whole thing if they just called it a party? Would the kids leave their seats if there wasn't so much pressure to dance? How do you think it felt to go home and talk about the dance?

Isn't the church kind of like that sometimes? We show up, probably have some drinks and cookies, but are we prepared to talk about what happened if we weren't specifically participating in the dance? Jesus tells a parable today about the dance. "What do you think, a man had two sons . . .?"

Jesus tells this parable on the eve of his arrest and trial. The rubber is meeting the road and he has distilled this message of love and compassion down to a simple story. **Actions speak louder than words.** What you do matters more than what you say. Always. No doubts. Our actual behavior is what matters most.

Dorothy Day, leader of the Catholic Worker movement told her New York City community. "Judgment will not hinge on how you invested in the stock market. Judgment is only based on how you invested in the poor and marginalized." My own UCC colleague and one of the great preachers of this generation, Rev. James Forbes, says repeatedly, "You can't get to heaven without a reference letter from the poor."

Remember the Pharisees, this ruling class of people for whom religious law showed the way. They did not like Jesus saying these things. They did not want to share their power. Salvation went through them. They had earned their authority through years of study and structure. They wanted to know by what authority Jesus had come to preach and teach in the synagogue. Jesus asked a simple question. "Did baptism come from heaven or from human origin?" Not wanting to be proven wrong, they answered, "We do not know." It was the right answer. We do not know where baptism comes from. Probably a little bit of each. What we do know is how it feels to be welcomed by the Spirit and feel connected to the community. We do know that everyone is equal in the waters of baptism, no one is *more* holy, *more* righteous, or *more* loved. All are

welcome in the waters. All are welcome to walk that path. Do you see how Jesus levels the playing field? It is brilliant. Authority comes to one lifts up the downtrodden, and allows those with power to see. Jesus builds a place for relationship when there previously was none.

Now everyone in the temple can hear the message of these two sons. The one who acts with compassion, love, and service, is the one who is closest to God. Actions speak louder than words. It becomes the building block for the church in the first century.

When Paul writes to his friends in Phillippi, they are struggling with the truth. Who has it? What is it? How do we get it? It is an honest struggle and one that is repeated in a thousand ways in all our lives. This desire to know and understand is on the hearts and minds of that early church. They want the assurance of eternal life. Paul writes back to this struggling community, not stand strong in your belief, or don't waver, or fight to the death for what you believe in. For Paul his life was built on such notions for many years. What he learns about Jesus in his journey is not about who has the biggest cross, it is about who has the softest heart. God works on those who are humble in heart and mind. God is revealed to those who listen and grow. Knowledge and understanding can be proven wrong and do not stand the test of time. The condition of our heart will allow us to walk with God. Humility, not knowing, is where the truth lies. Authority lies in the answer, "we do not know". Grace and power and strength lie in the humble heart. Our lives are important to God, and God desires for us to be one. That prayer that Paul writes, "That they may all be one," is our guide. It rings the symbol of the United Church of Christ. Look at your hymnal, it is embossed on the cover. Paul's prayer for the church is that we may be together. The method to getting there is humility.

Today we are embarking on a journey called "A Sacred Conversation on Race". It is a journey that hundreds of churches are engaged in right now. There are two truths that guide this journey. First, humility, we don't know how another person thinks and feels until we listen. And second, actions speak louder than words. It is the only way to build the church and grow in our faith. The only reason we are not fully a multi-racial and multi-cultural church is that we haven't been humble enough to allow for our own thoughts and feelings to change. We haven't acted in a way that invites others into our lives.

This sacred conversation on race is about you and me. I have not done it either. I can along just fine in my own little world without opening my heart to another. I sometimes think that giving money to PRISM or volunteering at Families Moving Forward is enough. If we were to ask Jesus or write to Paul, I have to imagine their answers as they have laid out in today's lesson.

The good news friends is that here at Robbinsdale United Church of Christ we are not here to proclaim that we have a corner on the truth. We

are here to build skills for the journey. We are here, just like Jesus' disciples chose to follow. We are learning how to love, learning how to soften our hearts, learning how to lead with humility, learning how to act, and learning how to listen for God's still speaking voice in a variety of languages and experiences. We are here to increase our faith and grow closer to God, and it doesn't matter our age, our ability, our mental or physical capacity. God loves each of us and wants us to "all be made one."

Our journey is not over until we have created, with God, that holy space.

AMEN.