

How to Read a Book - January 24, 2016  
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## **How To Read A Book** St. Matthew 21 :23-32

My mother gave me instruction in many things. One of her admonitions is: be careful what you read. This is solid advice and even better regarding Biblical scholars. In our gospel lesson, some commentators take the position that there is a distinction between verse 27 and verse 28. They isolate Jesus' dialogue with the religious leaders about power, and the parable of the two kids.

I, however, prefer to read Rohrbaugh and Malina's Social-Science Commentary on the first three gospels, because they put the two verses together. This makes sense because the story demonstrates the veracity of the conversation. And it is harsh.

The discussion reminds me of another panel of a "Peanuts" cartoon. Miss Violet offers Charlie some candy. She produces two different kinds and offers him a choice. Miss Lucy subtly tells Charlie to tell Miss Violet that he simply cannot make up his mind. (the rationale: Miss Violet will offer him both pieces). But when he answers Miss Violet, she replies, "Well, if you can't make up your mind then I won't give you either," and walks away.

The religious leaders are bewildered by Jesus. And his disciples, they never seem to get it. In their reality, they want to know where Jesus' authority comes from. The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes is right on: there is nothing new under the sun. This is a power game, and they want to know where they fit in.

If you are like me, you become frustrated when people answer your question with a question. Jesus' response is a classic rabbinic method: "From whom did John the Baptist get his authority" The leaders are caught between a rock and a hard place. If they reply John got his authority from God, Jesus is certain to ask them why they refuse to listen to him. If they say his power does not come from God, they are pretty sure the crowd will lynch them. So, they answer, "We are unsure." Jesus looks at his disciples and says, "That's a wrap! And they leave.

In the ninth chapter of this same gospel, Jesus explains to a woman that her sins are forgiven. And, of course, he is confronted by, who else? The usual suspects. Jesus

asks, "Which is easier? To forgive sin or to heal?" For Jesus, it is the same-old-same-old. The person is made whole, and is not that the point?

The center of our gospel lesson is that the incarnate Son of God is present doing the will of God. He is sharing the Good News of God's unconditional love for all, and God's desire for restoration. The argument, 'how many angels can dance on the head of a pin' and their ilk, just do not matter.

Remember that power thingy? Perhaps it was the number of people listening and paying attention to Jesus, the taxmen, and the hookers, who are reacting to Jesus and his message with joy. They are those who are discovering a new life that the 'old' religion of rules and regulations does not provide.

Again, to demonstrate his point, Jesus tells another story. Our lives are our stories. A father asks his two sons to work in his vineyard. One went the other did not. The first son initially said "Heck no I won't go," but reconsidered and obeyed. The second son just said no.' Obedience versus disobedience.

Does this sound familiar? I hesitate to share with you how often I choose expedience over obedience. I sometimes catch myself answering a question with what I think is safe, rather than what is right. In fact, as I have surveyed my life, and I am ashamed at how often I have done this.

We know God tasks us with loftier principles than the world. God is not enthralled with people who answer with a quick yes, and then do not follow through. When we ask a friend for something, we want an honest answer, one that you can count on. We are hemmed in by people who are "yes" people.

Living the New Life is like a caterpillar developing into a butterfly. Without a transformation, this crawling caterpillar weaves a cocoon and is encapsulated in it. Then a wonder-filled process takes place called metamorphosis. Finally an all-new being - a butterfly - emerges. Once earthbound now It now can see life from a loftier perch.

When we meet God through Jesus Christ, we begin to see ourselves as God sees us. In a sense, this is all God demands. As we have seen, God desires performance over promise. And in that obedience, we find what we have been looking for. We are called

to be "People of the Yes." May we dare to believe that we can live God's way, and not accepting anything less? Alleluia. Amen.