



THE  
PLYMOUTH  
PULPIT

watch the sermons | [plymouthchurch.org](https://plymouthchurch.org)

# “Who is Outside?”

Matthew 21:28-32

**Brett Younger**  
**Senior Minister**

January 15, 2023

*“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he didn’t go. Which of the two did the will of his father?”*

*They said, “The first.”*

*Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you didn’t believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you didn’t change your minds and believe him.”*

Matthew 21:28-32

Carol’s grandmother, Bennie, lived next to her sister, Cecil, in Austin, Texas, for 50 years. After their husbands died, Bennie and Cecil began eating most of their meals together. That lasted for 15 years. They walked the same path several times a day until Aunt Cecil died, and Grandmother Smith had to move.

Years later, some of the family was visiting in Austin when one of the grandsons started talking about that path. We tried to guess how many years it would be before the grass covered the path. What did the people who moved into those two houses think of the path? Wouldn’t you be more likely to be friends with your neighbor if there was a path from your door to theirs? Wouldn’t it be a shame if no one ever used the path?

Carol and I went to see how the path was doing. The two houses were even closer together than I remembered.

The doors are not more than twenty feet apart. Half of the path was still impossible to miss, but the other half was impossible to see. The people who moved into Grandmother's house put up a seven-foot-tall wooden fence that cuts off half the path. The wall's only purpose is to separate those two houses.

Do you think they put up the fence after they got to know the neighbors? It seems more likely that they put up it up before the neighbors moved in. They assumed they would not want a path from their house to someone else's.

Robert Frost writes:

“Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
that sends a frozen-ground-swell under it,  
and spills the upper boulders in the sun  
and makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
Before I build a wall, I'd ask to know  
what I was walling in or walling out,  
and to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
that wants it down.”

God is the one who wants the walls down. Jesus grew up worshipping the God of the exodus, the God who showed up in Jericho, and the God who destroys walls. Jesus was taught to act on behalf of and in solidarity with the outsiders kept out by the walls.

It is the last week of Jesus' life—the Monday morning after the triumphal entry. Jesus is in the temple and the religious people wish he was not. They do not like Jesus' friends.

As he usually does, Jesus tells a story. If there had

been an inquest into Jesus' death, this parable of the two brothers would have been presented as one of the things that got Jesus killed: "Once upon a time, a man had two boys. He goes to the older one and says, "Son, I need you to work in the yard today."

The boy replies, "No. I don't think so."

A little later, the father looks up from what he is doing and sees his son trimming the shrubs. The father goes to the younger son and says, "You need to help your brother."

The second son answers, "Father, nothing would please me more than to work in the yard. I'll be right there."

Two hours later the entitled son is lying on the sofa watching Tik Toks.

Jesus leans forward, "Now think hard. Which one pleases the father—the son who says he won't work and then does, or the one who promises to work and never shows up?"

It is a no-brainer. It is not what either boy says that is most important. It is what each finally does that matters. That is obvious. That is not what gets Jesus crucified.

What gets Jesus killed is when he tells the religious people which brother they are. They are the ones who say the right things, believe the right things, and stand for the right things, but they do not do the things God asks them to do.

Jesus keeps pushing it: "The first son is the people you look down on who are ahead of you in God's eyes. Some of the hookers and the homeless who wouldn't feel welcome in your conversations are more caring and honest than you are. You're the children who promise to work, and then take the day off."

Who do you think we are in Jesus' story? Unfortunately, the second son is the church people who have the right ideas, but do not work hard enough at making a difference for those who are left out. Quiet sympathy—the occasional feeling of concern—is a response to prejudice that does not cost us anything. Justice is not a feeling, but a doing. Spirituality is not passive. It is no good to talk the talk if you don't walk the walk.

Small wonder that on Friday of that week Jesus is executed. Jesus takes on the scribes and Pharisees, not because they say wrong things, but because they do not do anything.

Part of the problem is that people who get handed the breaks begin to think they deserve them. We take the ways in which our lives are comfortable as evidence that we should have comfortable lives. Just like banks prefer to loan money to people who have money, we tend to shower love on people who are already loved. We enjoy the company of those who have been fortunate in the same ways we have been fortunate. We are proud of what we have lucked into.

When sociologists look for the factor that most consistently predicts whether a person in the United States will grow up to be wealthy, they usually land on the same question. What question is most helpful in determining whether an adult will have money? Can you guess what it is?

When wealthy people are asked, "What do you think is the best predictor of wealth?" they say "hard work," "education," or "intelligence." All of those are factors. Your zip code, what you look like, and your race matter.

But the best question with which to predict a person's future wealth is:

“Do their parents have money?” Isn't that true for most of what we have and most of who we are? We have what we have been given. Are we in church only because we are committed to a spiritual journey or is it also because we have been cared for by faithful people? If we are kind, how much of that is due to the kindness we have been given? If we are intelligent, is it because of hard work or an IQ we did nothing to deserve? Do we secretly believe that if we have a home, we must be smarter than those who do not? Do we think that if we have our mental health, we must be stronger than those who struggle with mental illness? If we have an intact family, does that mean we are more loving than those who do not?

It is obvious how absurd that is. There are people smarter than we are who are homeless, stronger than we are who suffer from mental illness, and more loving than we are whose family has fallen apart. We make too many snap judgments. We do not look everybody in the eye.

Who wants a close friend much poorer than we are? How awkward is it when we say, “We're going out to dinner”? What about a friend without much education? How hard will it be to find things to talk about? Does it look peculiar to have friends much older than we are? What kind of people do good, thoughtful people who think of themselves as inclusive exclude? Our lists might include garbage collectors, the mentally disabled, the physically challenged, religious fundamentalists, residents of nursing homes, prisoners, neighbors who do not fit in, or relatives who embarrass us.

In some Asian languages there are separate words for an inclusive we and an exclusive we. The inclusive term means we and they together, while the exclusive term means us, but not them. The challenge for us is to make sure that those on the edges are invited to be part of us, so that there is no us and them.

Jesus says, "There are people at the party you wouldn't invite."

When we feel superior to others, it is usually because we have not imagined ourselves in their place.

Rudyard Kipling's poem *We and They* closes with this stanza:

All good people agree,  
and all good people say,  
all nice people, like Us, are We  
and everyone else is They.  
But if you cross over the sea,  
instead of over the way,  
you may end by (think of it!) looking on We  
as only a sort of They!

We are products, victims and beneficiaries of circumstances beyond our control, and as long as there is racial privilege, there will be racism. Some of the people we do not think much of, are doing more with the cards they have been dealt than we are.

A young, successful executive is traveling down a Chicago street. At first, he is going too fast in his sleek, black, twelve-cylinder, two-month-old Jaguar. Then he slows down and watches for kids darting out from between parked cars. A brick smashes into the Jag's shiny black door. He hits the brakes and backs up to the spot where



the brick's been thrown. He jumps out of the car, grabs a kid, and pushes him up against a parked car: "What are you doing? That brick is going to cost your parents a lot of money."

"Please, mister, I'm sorry! I didn't know what else to do! I threw the brick because no one would stop!"

Tears are rolling down the boy's face as he points around the parked car: "It's my brother. He fell out of his wheelchair and I can't get him up. Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He's hurt and he's too heavy for me."

The young executive tries to swallow the lump in his throat. He lifts the young man back into the wheelchair, takes out his handkerchief and wipes the scrapes and cuts, checking to see that everything is going to be okay. He watches the boy push his brother down the sidewalk toward their home. It is a long walk back to the sleek, black, shining, twelve-cylinder, two-month-old Jaguar. He decides not to fix the door. He keeps the dent to remind him not to go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick to get his attention.

There are people out there throwing bricks, but we do not usually make the effort to understand why. The only way to tear down the walls is to accept everybody as a child of God, no matter what they look like or how they act. The measure of our understanding of grace is not how we accept people like us, but how we care for the ones who have not been given the advantages we have been given.

The people we think we do not need are the ones we need the most.



We need outsiders, because when we invite them in, God comes with them. God invites us to welcome strangers, to act like a friend to someone who isn't, smile at someone who has not smiled at us, go out of our way to care for people whose circumstances are more difficult than our own, and keep asking hard questions.

What does it mean to have what are usually called privileges? What does it mean to be born white in a country with a long history of prejudice? What does it mean to be raised in a family that is never short on comforts? What does it mean to receive the gift of an education?

There are millions whose skin color makes them a target for harassment, discrimination, and murder. Why are our lives in so many ways so different from most? We do not deserve the lives we have, and those with harder lives do not deserve theirs either. We need to see that our lives are linked to theirs.

God will help us embrace our differences and live in hope. God will lead us to an abolitionist spirituality, working for an end to prejudice. God will break down the walls that separate people by race, culture, or religion. God will help us repent of our sins of racism and prejudice, known and unknown. God will transform apathy into a passion for justice, as we care for the outsider, and as we share the love of God.

*sermon © Brett Younger*