By Mark Peters

In today’s Gospel Jesus is responding to the chief priests and elders who have questioned his authority, and asks a question about carrying out a father’s will. They have to admit the obvious, that it’s a matter of what you do, not what you say. He then abruptly tells these learned, supposedly holy men that tax collectors and prostitutes are more pleasing to their heavenly Father and far closer to being saved than they are.

I can imagine these priests and elders saying “but that’s not fair!” But God has a different idea of what’s fair from the great ones of this world. The difference is based in ultimate values. The powerful place ultimate value on power – they have to in order to stay powerful. So what seems fair to them is rewarding their friends, punishing their enemies, brooking no dissent, suspecting everyone and scapegoating the most convenient, and using power ruthlessly and violently whenever necessary.

Today some feel that their political leaders should exhibit this kind of kind of “fairness,” rather than the fairness described in Scripture, where the last come first, the poor are fed, justice is served and swords are beaten into plowshares. Yet we know that that type of power always comes to nothing, and that the real power comes through service: as Paul puts it, doing nothing out of selfishness, humbling regarding others as more important than yourselves, looking out for others’ interests over your own. That is the way we do the will of God and not merely talk about it or pay lip service to it in church.

This servant attitude has a lot to do with humility, as Paul points out in his description of Christ’s own “emptying” of himself and his ego, his willingness to humble himself despite his status, and his complete obedience to God’s will as he discerned it through prayer and fasting. A lack of humility is not merely an unattractive personal attribute, but contributes to our social problems, from national security to race relations to our attitude toward migrants to how we treat the planet.

And if all this way through you have been sure this is directed at Donald Trump, well you may be partially right, but perhaps lack of humility is a universal failing that we tend to see in others much more clearly than ourselves. Presidents and politicians especially should take these readings – and Jesus’ warnings – to heart, but then again so should we all. Whenever we place too much value on our own or our group’s power, blind ourselves to our friends’ failings while magnifying those of our enemies, crush those in our own group who dissent from the common wisdom, impute inhuman motives to our enemies, and
resort to violence of word or deed or wish evil upon them, these readings speak to us as well.

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