For the last few weeks, we've been looking at some of Jesus' so-called parables of judgment. These are little stories he told that come with a reckoning and have a surprise ending.

In our parable today of the two sons who profess one thing to their father and do another, Jesus tells it when challenged by religious leaders who saw him as a threat to their power but used their belief as cover for their hypocrisy. Here we find Jesus teaching in the temple in proximity to the power of the chief priests and elders who managed the house of God. They want to know by what authority he teaches and does the things he does. They are using Mosaic law as a claim to their God-ordained right to judge. Jesus does not question the law itself, but he sees right through them.

He asks them about whether they think the work of John the Baptist was from divine or human origin. They say they don’t know because they know the people regard John as a prophet and they are afraid of the crowd. Why are they afraid of the crowd? Because they know that if a majority turns against them, no matter what divine right they claim, they will lose their power.

It’s all always about power, don’t you know?! If that hasn’t become obvious to you this week with the events in our country and our city, then you suffer from hardening of the categories caused by hyper-partisanship.

I was on three calls just Wednesday asking me about how pastors should navigate the political winds of the times we live in. A documentary team from the news organization Vice was asking how I and other pastors are speaking and leading and whether our approach has changed. A major denomination asked me to share with their pastors some words of encouragement and guidance on how to preach and engage in the community in ways that keep the integrity of the gospel and at the same time keep the congregation together. A pastor search committee in Tennessee was worried about their lead candidate being too political. I
told them this is 2020 and we don’t have the luxury of being chaplains to the culture or a religious service club.

Everything is polarizing now, it seems. Every public word is scrutinized—even from the pulpit—to see if it comes from the left or the right. And there’s no refuge in saying you’re middle of the road. That painted line has been erased. I like to say I am partisan to the gospel first and last, that I care more about a moral vision of politics than a partisan one. The real challenge, though, is to keep returning to the words of Jesus to test true belief.

And how does he do that? What are his standards of accounting? How does he book belief?

He tells a parable of a man with two sons he tells to go work in his vineyard. Now, we should stop there and say that a vineyard was a well-known metaphor for Israel. So, Jesus is telling the religious leaders who believe they are already working in the vineyard, so to speak, doing the will of their heavenly Father, that they need to reconsider what it means to answer that call.

So, two sons. One answers his father right off saying that he will not go. Later he changes his mind and goes. The other says he will go, but he does not. Jesus asks which did the will of his father, and they answer the first, of course. Jesus then applies this directly to them. Tax collectors and prostitutes will go into the kingdom of heaven before them, he says. These social outcasts believed John and reformed their lives and began to walk a straight path. But even after seeing the results of John’s preaching of repentance, the religious leaders would not change their minds and believe.

What was their problem? They were clinging to belief that was being used for their own benefit and not for others. They had the appearance of piety without the practice of it. They had words without deeds.

Mahatma Gandhi cited what he called seven deadly social sins:  
Wealth without work  
Pleasure without conscience  
Knowledge without character  
Business without ethics  
Science without humanity  
Religion without sacrifice  
Politics without principle.

That about summarizes it,
doesn’t it? It’s one thing to walk
the aisle and profess your faith
in Jesus as the Son of God; it’s
another thing to walk out of the
church and live as if Jesus is your
Lord. It’s one thing to say you
follow someone who told you
that true faith is reckoned by
following through and doing
what is right by the powerless;
it’s another thing to show moral
courage when it costs you
something and actually do that
in the crucial moment.

This week we got the word that
the police officers who
murdered Breonna Taylor in her
own apartment, in her own bed,
were justified in their killing of
her. And like so many times
before, white Christians
reflexively defended the actions
of the police against Black
Americans, no matter the
circumstances. They claim law
and order and Back the Blue, and
they do it under the cloak of
Christian piety, citing Bible
verses out of context and failing
to see that justice and mercy are
the weightier matters of the law
that we must practice if we want
to book our belief as a valid and
valued asset on our spiritual
balance sheet.

Jesus sides with the publicly
disreputable tax collectors and
prostitutes over the publicly
reputable religious leaders. He
celebrates the repentance and
reform that happens in the lives
of those who were socially
scorned, and he calls into
question the legitimacy of the
faith of those who will use the
veneer of piety to cover their
pursuit of power.

This week we passed a biennial
budget for the city of Dallas that
increases funding to police in a
time when calls from the streets
for investment in communities
that have been neglected for
decades has been clear and
strong. Sixty percent of our city
budget goes to public safety. We
have the highest number of
officers per capita of any city in
Texas. There is no positive
correlation between the number
of police and the rate of crime.
Instead, we know that when
people have hope for a better
life, when they can get jobs and
earn a living wage and send their
kids to decent public schools and
have parks and sidewalks in
their neighborhoods, crime goes
down and prosperity goes up.
But once again as a city our
leaders caved in to those who
financially support their crave to
stay in power. And once again,
their faith is undermined by
their deeds.
We have heard this week that we may not have clear results in the presidential election or a peaceful transfer of power. Those in power who fear they might lose are doing everything they can to throw doubt on the legitimacy of the election in advance so that they can deny and defy the results. We have moved beyond the point of partisanship now to where we have to defend democracy itself. And the question some are asking is whether the church will speak and act on the side of the powerful or the people?

If you are uncomfortable with my talking about that from this pulpit, no more so than I. But look closely again at what Jesus says about booking belief. His test case is whether we follow through in preaching good news to the socially scorned and welcoming them into the kingdom or instead try to deny them access in order to protect our positions of privilege.

The late Rachel Held Evans was right when she said that “what makes the gospel offensive isn’t who it keeps out but who it lets in.”¹ The same is true of our democracy. We don’t have one rule for our piety and another for our politics.

We have had too many examples just this week of politicians claiming to be Christians who talked out of both sides of their mouth when it became expedient for them. This is like the two sons in Jesus’ parable. Professing you will do something and not doing it is judged more harshly than professing not to but changing your mind and doing the right thing in the end. Politics without principle is destroying the social contract.

So, what will we do with this parable of Jesus today? Search our soul. Ask ourselves by what standard will Jesus hold our faith to account. What if he really does judge our belief by our behavior? By how we use our power and influence with respect toward those who have been left out and pushed away and pressed down and shut up. Would that accounting standard vindicate or convict you?

Some stories are too good not to be true. Like the one about the young man who came up to George Washington during the

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¹ Searching for Sunday (Nelson, 2015).
Revolutionary War and said: 
*General Washington, I want you to know that I believe in you and your cause. I fully support you.*
Washington graciously thanked him and asked the young man, 
*What regiment are you in? Under whose command do you serve? What uniform do you wear?* The young man answered, *Oh, I'm not in the army. I'm just a civilian.*
The general replied, *Young man, if you believe in me and my cause, then you join the army. You put on a uniform. You get yourself a rifle and you fight.*

It’s not what we say we believe in the end that matters; it’s what we do. Amen.