

“A Wild Ride”  
Matthew 21:23-32  
September 25, 2011

A few years ago, the talk show host, Dr. Phil was actually a talk show GUEST, and at one point, the interviewer asked Dr. Phil, “If you could interview anyone past or present, who would it be?” Any idea who he said? Without hesitation – “Jesus Christ. I would really like to interview Jesus Christ. I would like to have a conversation with him about the meaning of life.”

Obviously, Dr. Phil has not cracked open a Bible in a while. You would be crazy to sit Jesus on a couch for a psychological interview. Before you could diagnose him with a Messiah complex, Jesus would turn every one of your questions into an uninvited journey into your psyche. He would have your number from the beginning. He would size you up, tell you to sell everything you own, give the money to the poor, take up your cross, and then follow me. No, Dr. Phil, you really do not want to interview Jesus. And, I do not want to either.

As the chief priests learn, when we have a little talk with Jesus it does not always make it right. Talking with Jesus can be dangerous. It’s like being on wild ride at the North Carolina State Fair – the twists, turns and dips come so fast that our heads spin and we wonder if we are about to get reacquainted with the fried snickers bar we ate earlier. Only it’s not just our bellies that are turned upside down with Jesus. It is our lives! That’s what Jesus is like: a wild ride.

And, the chief priests forgot to fasten their seatbelts and pull the safety bar across their chests, so they are being slung all over the place and holding on for dear life. The day before when Jesus came waltzing into Jerusalem on a donkey – he went to the temple, looked around, and exploded. He turned over their tables sending the money clanging to the floor. He threw out everything that competed for their allegiance and that included some of the people he ran out...with whips. Jesus had had it. He’d had it. He had taught. He had preached. He had healed, and he looked around the temple, and THIS is what they do? After his outburst, he just got out of town and spent the night in Bethany – probably with his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. But, sometimes even good friends cannot tame our disillusionment, and Jesus was still in a mood when he went back to the city the next morning – so much so that a fig tree got on his last nerve and he blessed it out. Cursed it, he did. And, in that fig cursing state of mind, he goes back to the temple and runs into all those religious people who wish he would go away. They don’t like what he is doing. They are tired of his reprimands. And, they don’t trust his intentions or his motives. He has challenged everything they hold sacred and everything they hold dear. The main thing they want to know is just who does he think he is? What gives you the right to come in here and do the things you do and say the things you say?

That is an honest response to Jesus. He would never have lasted as a pastor – they say at least two things you don’t critique as a minister is mama and the Bible. And, what does Jesus say? “He who does not hate both father and mother cannot be my followers?” And, as for your Bible, your scripture, it is fulfilled in me. The nerve! Somebody call a board meeting! We can chuckle at that, but what are the issues that get you all up in arms? What are the topics that make your face turn red when you talk about them? What are the things that you are willing to fight for and argue about? And, what if Jesus walked up to you, turned over your table and said, “You’re wrong. Look at what has hijacked your spirit, yet you have not brought even one person to the Kingdom of God.” At some level, they know he’s right. But, they can’t let go.

So, they do the next best thing. They try to suck Jesus into their dysfunction. Jesus, who are you anyway? What gives you the right to tell us what to do? And, if we are getting life SO

wrong, then tell us, what is the meaning? OK, Dr. Phil, you're about to be embarrassed on national television. Jesus says, "First, let me ask YOU a question. You answer mine, and I'll answer yours? Fair enough? Easy question. It's about John's baptism – you remember John, "repent you brood of vipers" the Baptist, don't you? Well, who gave John the right to baptize out there in the wilderness? Was it God or was it John's idea?"

Jesus puts the authorities in a bind. They don't mind offering opinions on most things, but to have to take a stance on whether the charismatic John the Baptist was doing God's work or was just a popular flash in the pan ... that was bound to get them in trouble with someone, no matter what they said. Jesus pulls out the old "Have you stopped watching Desperate Housewives?" kind of question. There is no good answer. Round one, Jesus. We don't know, they say. But, the truth is that they do know. They know they are wrong. And, there is nothing worse than knowing you are wrong but being too stubborn to say so.

And Jesus snapped back that if they weren't going to answer, well, then neither would he. Except he goes right into a story, which was, in its own Jesus kind of way, an answer. A "put yourself in the story and see where it takes you and then you have your answer" sort of answer.

He said: Picture two sons. The dad tells one of them to rake the yard. The first son, says, "I don't want to." Here, the idea is definitely about not wanting or willing the same thing as the Father. It's not so much a "NO, I won't do it," so much as a "No, I really don't care to." (Huge insult to a Middle Eastern father, and all of Jesus' listeners would have known that.) The dad goes to the second son and tells him to rake the yard. The second son, said, "I'm on it." This is the expected response, the respectful response. So far, second son is obviously way ahead.

But this is a Jesus story – a wild ride, with twists and turns. There is more to come. The first son actually grabs a rake and starts raking. We don't know why. He just did. Maybe he looked at all the work and decided to lend a hand. Second son gets distracted, or maybe even had never planned to do what his father asked in the first place. Maybe he just said okay to get the old man off his back. But he never does go into the yard, never does pick up a rake.

Which one DID what the father wanted? Jesus asked. The chief priests thought, "Darn. If only he had asked, which one did rightly?" Because then they could have said neither. One son dissed his father and the other one lied. But Jesus asked which one DID the will of the father. Which one came through? Only one answer. The first son, the reluctant one— he came through.

Jesus had them right where he wanted them. He went on to say that it was the dishonorable, unsavory characters, that were likely to march into heaven first. *I tell you, tax collectors and hookers are going to be in the Kingdom of God before you.* What a thing to say in a place of worship. No surprise that Jesus was executed the next week. Jesus takes on the religious not because they say the wrong things, but because who cares what they say? What does their faith compel them to do? Faith with follow through is what gives credibility.

We hear this story, and we're on Jesus' side. We like it when he puts down self-righteous people. The problem is that some days this is about us. According to a Newsweek poll, 84% of Americans say that spirituality is important in their lives. When asked, "When do you feel the strongest connection to God?" 40% said, "praying alone"—that's a fine answer. 21% responded, "out in nature"—also fine. 21% "in a worship service"—I like those people. 6%—when praying with others. 2%—when reading a sacred text. They didn't even have a category for acting on your faith, serving others, doing what God commanded, because unfortunately we have come to believe that religion is something you say and preserve instead of something you do.

There is no shortage of people who think, say, believe, or stand for all the right things – mama and the Bible! There have always been plenty of those in the world. What God is short of are people who will go where God calls them and do what God gives them to do.

I tell you, the hookers and the tax collectors will get into heaven before you. I've been doing a little study of the churches and the demographics here and blah, blah, blah. This church appeals to people who share these opinions. That church appeals to people with that education – and so on. But, what the demographics do not tell me is which church is for the sinners? Yes, of course, we're all sinners, but the OBVIOUS sinners –the hookers and tax collectors? Who does the church point to and say NO, bad person? Who has to drive to Raleigh to feel welcome in worship? Who have we left out? What if we became the church for them? What if we took seriously the observation that we have resources and budgets and meetings and ideas and conversations, but we have not had a baptism, we have not introduced a single new person to Jesus Christ in the last year? I'm uncomfortable with that. We all should be.

Could we take that discomfort and start to pay attention – start to notice who is around you. Who in your office or your school or in your errand running is hurting because they are different, they have made poor decisions, or they are just terrible misfits for good religious folk. We do understand, right, that when Jesus gives us our exit interview, he's going to ask what we did with that person. He's going to ask if they mattered enough for us to bring them to him. He's going to ask why their sin seemed so much more important than ours.

I had a dream the other night. (Actually, I read about it in a book but I'm making it my own this morning.) And in my dream I had died and I stood before the gates of heaven. God opened the gates and asked, "Why should I let you in? Heaven is only for experts." "Experts?" I said. I didn't know you had to be an expert to get into heaven, so I blurted out the first thing I could think of. "I'm an expert bell ringer." God said, "Puh-lease. If it weren't for color coded music, you'd be hiding under the table. So I thought some more. "Some folks said I was a good listener." God said, "You weren't bad, but that doesn't make you an expert." I said, "I was a great pet owner. Dogs and cats found a safe haven with me. Does that count?" "Not as an expert. Only experts are allowed in here." I had nothing left. "Sorry," God said, and the pearly gates slammed shut. I turned to go, but suddenly the light dawned and I ran back to the gates and rang the bell. God opened the gates again and said, "What are you doing back?" "I am an expert at something," I said. "Oh, yeah?" God said. "What?" I said, "I am an expert sinner. I've thought of millions of new and clever ways to sin. I spent a lifetime honing my expertise and never seemed to run out of ways to do things that break your heart, God. But I'm a sorry expert. I'm really sorry for being so good at sinning. Can you forgive me?" And a huge smile broke out on God's face, and the gates swung wide open, and God said, "It's about time you found out who this place is for! Come on in." May God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. May God's will be done at WMCC as it is in heaven...wouldn't that be a wild ride?