

“I Paid A Guy To Hammer The Nails”

Matthew 21:23-27

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him.

“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

John’s baptism—where did it come from?

Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”

They discussed it among themselves and said,

“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask,

‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’

But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”

So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”

Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

“I Paid A Guy To Hammer The Nails”

Matthew 21:23-32

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Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

A sermon such as today’s is probably one of the easiest that I will write all year. Being fresh off an extended break I am just *itching* to preach. I have a lot to say to you today but, alas, not much time to say it in given it is World Communion Sunday and our annual Blessing of the Children. So, without further ado, and is often the case, we begin with a story.

I had many aspirations for my time off, particularly the construction of a railing on the deck of Linda’s She-Shack. Which I will tell you right up front I did *not* accomplish. In fact, I did not even get it started. Turns out, however, this was a victory in itself, as I am trying to let some things go and not be so obsessive all the time. I did, however, obtain the wood to be used to eventually construct the railing, and got it all stacked in my shop so it is on hand when the building bug bites.

II.

This past spring, I tumbled down the rabbit hole that is Facebook Market Place. First to sell a boat, a motor, another boat and motor, a motorcycle, and a motorcycle trailer. Then, with those proceeds in hand, began searching the listings in order to begin to furnish the She-Shack.

During that process I found a gentleman who lives over on the river upstream from Ogdensburg who had about 250 board feet of eastern white cedar that has been drying in his garage for the past year. So it was that on a beautiful September day I drove my motorcycle over to check out the wood, which I did eventually purchase a few days later after returning with my truck. That first trip I got to talking to the seller, who was a pretty interesting fellow, and with whom I made a bit of a connection. He had cut the cedar from his property for a mantle over the fireplace of his very lovely house, and was selling the rest.

III.

He had stacked the cedar in his very spacious garage which also served as his work shop, complete with all the woodworking tools one would expect. Being a “Do It Yourself” kind of guy, I asked him, “Tell me about this house of yours.” He said proudly, “I built it.” Which, given the size of the house (HUGE) impressed me greatly, having just spent the past four years building a very nice, but *much* more modest structure comparatively speaking.

I said, “You *built* this?” “Yes,” he said, “I designed the whole thing myself”; then, proceeded to talk about the structural load the roof would bear over (what looked like from the outside) a soaring two story cathedral ceiling. While interesting and certainly impressive, I was more intrigued by how, exactly, it was framed (that is, put together) so I started asking him questions. To which he said, “Well, I *paid* a guy to hammer the nails.”

IV.

Now, I do not wish to sound critical, but it seems to me that he might have glossed over a few things, and missed a very important step or two along the way. Don’t get me wrong, designing such a structure is *quite* a feat. I certainly do not have the skills to do so, neither could have built such a structure or even dared to attempt it. However, the word-smithing She-Shacker in me could not help but draw a distinction between *designing* something and actually *building* something. I have learned that lesson a hundred times over the past 4 years; often painfully so.

Please understand, my purpose in relating this story to you is not to diminish this gentleman in any way. He was a really good guy, and justifiably proud of his efforts and accomplishment; no question. Instead, this story illuminates a deeper trend occurring in our society which is moving us away from the palpable, physical, and practical, and more toward the abstract, technical and theoretical. A trend which is also impacting our theology.

V.

Today’s scripture reading, Matthew 21:23-32, is one on which I have never preached. The main thrust of this narrative, on which most preachers would base their sermon, is found in the first few verses: *The chief priests and the elders of the people came to him and asked, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”*

Which, as you might imagine, is a central question in understanding Jesus as the Christ and his purpose among us. This will not be *our* question today, however.

Instead, I would like to direct our attention to the quandary with which Jesus confronts his questioners as to the nature of John's baptism: that is, was it from divine or human origin? Their answer? "We don't know." A gifted rhetorician and wily forensic debater, what made Jesus' question so clever, was not just his political astuteness but, moreover, his understanding that the chief priests and elders were approaching their faith from a perspective that was abstract, technical and theoretical.

VI.

Now, to be fair, this approach is quite common. Not only in that day, but down through the ages as well; and, especially, in our own. *Most* people begin with an intellectual and conceptual understand of God, and expect this to yield a satisfactory result in the final analysis. While it is certainly possible to design a house, even beautifully so, and then pay a guy to hammer the nails so that, at some future point, the result is lovely house in which one can make their home, faith simply will not work this way.

We cannot expect an abstract, technical or theoretical design of God to yield a real world religious house which creates any kind of spiritual home in which we would wish our faith to dwell. To do so is to gloss over the toil and experience faith requires, and miss more than a few steps along the way of our faith journey. *Designing* one's faith is not enough, we must also *build* our faith by being the ones to hammer the nails.

VII.

Were this three or four months from now, when we have our the new electronic sign up and running, it would show today's sermon title, "I Paid A Guy To Hammer The Nails" followed by the parenthetical caveat, "(It's not what you think...it is what you do.)" For most people, reading a sermon title like this makes them think about the cross and Christ being nailed upon it.

The real purpose of the cross, however, is what it persuades us, or compels us, to do in response to what Christ has done for us. To hammer nails so as

to *actually* build the Kingdom of God in keeping with divine design. Not just in the world, but more importantly I would argue, in our own lives as well. Having arrived at this point, I would like to end today's sermon by moving past mere metaphor to arrive at a palpable, physical, and practical understanding of the nails we are to hammer.

VIII.

Though the nails are essentially the same for all of us, each of us will use them in a variety of unique ways which are specific to our own needs; as they arise, and as circumstances dictate. Moments in our lives which always come as fleeting opportunities, usually at the most inconvenient times, when we hear the spirit whisper to us, calling and moving us to feed the hungry, offer a drink to those who thirst, welcome the stranger, cloth those in need, and visit those who are sick or in prison. Moments when we love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind; and love our neighbor as ourself. Moments in our lives when we are gentle and forbearing with others, readily forgiving them as the Lord has forgiven us. And, moments when we walk with people through the valley of the shadow of death, and suffer the little children to come unto God and forbid them not.

IX.

All of these are nails which we should not expect to be able to somehow pay a guy to hammer *for* us, they are nails we must hammer for *ourselves*. These moments are opportunities won for us by the nails which hammered Christ to the cross.

Having had our awareness of these moments greatly heightened today, we will go forth from this place back to our own lives and, no doubt, each of us will readily happen upon such moments waiting there for us to meet them. When these moments happen to us, we will undoubtedly struggle with the abstract, technical and theoretical aspects of our faith as did the chief priests and elders in today's scripture reading. Which is fine, and to be expected, and (probably) as it should be. Faced with such moments it is our tendency to similarly respond, "We do not know." But, we DO know, don't we? Knowing isn't the issue, *doing* is the issue: palpably, physically, and practically.

X.

I end today with a couple of my own nails I hammered during my time off this month. Not for the railing on the She-Shack, but for the home I am building where my faith might reside. I am including in the narrative sermon mailed or emailed out to everyone, a photo taken in front of the church on the evening of the Rummage Sale Sneak Peek. In the photo I am on my motorcycle all dressed in leather, with young Sebastian seated behind me.



I was headed back to the lake and had texted ahead to Linda to ask her to meet me at the street with some pizza for my dinner that night. I had opted not to go into the church myself, because I did not want to dampen what I knew would be a very festive mood; I had just come from the hospital where Galen had died just a short while earlier, and there would be no hiding my bloodshot eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

As I pulled up, however, Sebastian and his dad, Nick, were coming along the sidewalk and I could neither miss or ignore young Sebastian's exuberance. "Hop on!" I told him. Linda snapped the photo and I proceeded to give him a ride of about 5 feet. (First, I didn't have a second helmet and, second, Nick said Christy would be, um...*displeased*.)

XII.

The second photo I am including is an enlargement from the first showing just our faces. My look is one of sorrow and mourning, his one of joy and wonder.



It was a moment which captured both the walk with those we love through the valley of the shadow of death and, at once, forbidding not the little children to come unto God as Sebastian and I bandied about in the promised land of his youth. A fleeting moment of opportunity, at a most inconvenient time.

There are many more such moments to come; for all of us, and our church. Death and life, Communion and the Blessing of the Children. Amen.