

Humbuggery – VIRTUAL EDITION
Rev. Curtis Webster
Westminster Presbyterian Church - Ontario, CA
September 27, 2020
Year A - 17th Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 21:23-32

Surely if there ever was a man who thoroughly understood the human capacity for deceitfulness, it was the late, great P.T. Barnum. Barnum, who amassed a sizable personal fortune by artfully creating entertaining illusions in the circus world, spent a lot of time warning us against other kinds of illusions, illusions that could lead us to personal and financial ruin if not seen in advance for what they are.

In 1865, Barnum published a very entertaining (and very scary) book called *The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits and Deceivers Generally, in All Ages*. In the parlance of the time, “humbug” was a slang for “fraud” and Barnum adeptly pointed out humbug in all of its many varieties.

One particularly insightful paragraph, which, because of length, I cannot quote in its entirety, held up the hypocrisy of merchants and businesspeople who accused everyone else of humbug while practicing it freely themselves:

“And in what business is there not humbug? “There’s cheating in all trades but ours,” is the prompt reply from the boot-maker with his brown paper soles, the grocer with his floury sugar and chicoried coffee, the butcher with his mysterious sausages and queer veal . . .

Barnum’s list goes on for several more lines and he ends with this:

. . . all and every one protest each his own innocence, and warn you against the deceits of the rest. My inexperienced friend, take it for granted that they all tell the truth—about each other! and then transact your business.

Well, that’s enough to make the most starry-eyed optimist a thorough cynic.

And, as we see clearly from today’s passage, humbug had been around for quite a long

time before P.T. Barnum was born. Jesus ran into his fair share of humbug during His time on Earth. And, while I'm sure Jesus deplored the kind of humbug that could cheat an honest working man out of a day's wage, His real concern was a much bigger and more dangerous form of humbug, a humbug that was destroying the faith of His people from within, as an infestation of termites can slowly undermine the structural integrity of a house.

In the first part of today's reading, Jesus finds Himself under fire from the chief priests and elders for telling truths that make them very uncomfortable. And the chief priests and elders employ a tactic used by humbug-servers in all ages. Unable to argue with the substance of what Jesus says, they try to impeach the source. Whether Jesus' teachings are true is irrelevant, they argue, because Jesus does not have the authority to be teaching them. Jesus neatly disposes of that spurious argument with an ingenious and ironic challenge to the authority of the chief priests and elders.

But the real crux of the danger of the humbug of Jesus' day shows up in the second half of our reading. The Parable of the Two Sons states a simple but extremely important principle. Judge not by words but by actions. One son talks a good story but winds up doing nothing. Another son talks like a slacker, but ultimately acts like a responsible adult. Words are worthless unless they are backed up by action.

And, as Jesus goes on to note, lies and half-truths are not simply worthless. They are downright dangerous. The elite leadership in the Jerusalem Temple has twisted and misrepresented the words of the Old Testament so frequently that they have actually started to believe their own humbug. It's one thing to try to sell falsehood as truth. It's another thing altogether to become convinced of the truth of your falsehood.

And when Jesus says that tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of heaven before any of the high Temple officials enter, He isn't just flinging a very biting insult at the chief priests and elders, He is making a profound observation about truth itself. Perceiving the truth is less a matter of an extensive education than it is a clarity of the mind and the soul. Sometimes, it is the lower echelons of a society that have an advantage in the search for truth. Those in positions of leadership can become very invested in their own versions of the truth. Often, maintaining their power and authority depends on convincing the rest of us that their version is correct, to the exclusion of even the possibility that other points of view have validity. John came to them and spoke the truth, the actual truth, not some adulterated version of the truth, and they still did not change their minds. The chief priests and elders to all outward appearances had everything going for them but they were blind to all that really mattered. In that sense, the chief priests and elders are more deserving of our pity than our contempt.

P.T. Barnum was not a theologian. I'm not even sure if P.T. Barnum attended church. But P.T. Barnum shed a lot of light on the concepts of truth and humbug. P.T. Barnum was somewhat unique in that he never claimed his humbug was real. Everybody who has ever gone to a Barnum and Bailey circus has known that some of what they were seeing was illusion but they have loved every minute of it anyway. That's what you call "good humbug."

As a pastor, I would be guilty of professional malpractice if I were to preach cynicism. And that's not what I'm doing here. We can take reasonable precautions and entertain healthy skepticism and still be optimistic and hopeful. I don't believe, contrary to some of what P.T. Barnum may have implied, that people are inherently dishonest. I do believe, however, that dishonesty is a hazard of being human and something we should take care to detect, both in

ourselves and in others. But no matter how deeply entrenched misrepresentations and falsehoods may become, I also believe that faithful listening and careful discernment can keep any of us on the path to faith, truth and righteousness.

And that, my friends, is no humbug.