

**Sunday, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

**Pentecost 17A: Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16, Philippians 2:1-13, Matthew 21:23-32**

### **Beating the Iron Cage: For Love and Freedom**

#### **Introduction**

The essence of Jesus' Story of the Two Sons is very simple: it is about challenging the way faith, religious conviction loses its way, the way faith, religious conviction, becomes reduced, diminished to rationalized rules, laws, that metamorphose into little more than a cage for those who embrace them, and who ultimately are its victims.

Under today's rubric, theme, of *Stewardship for Love and Freedom*, I want to explain this problem of faith that loses its way, beginning with a term used by the German sociologist of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Max Weber: "the iron cage". Weber used the term not for religion as such, but for increasingly bureaucratized society, which he correctly foresaw and predicted. That said, in his thought, Weber also understood that religion may contribute to this rationalizing process where the magic lustre of the world and existence is lost, where the world loses its enchantment.

So, let's first think through a little of Weber's insights and then turn to the Gospel reading for today, finally drawing some conclusions for stewardship that turns upon love and freedom.

#### **Max Weber, the Iron Cage and Disenchantment**

Max Weber wrote the seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* back in 1905. It has been standard reading ever since in historical, political and religious studies. In that work, Weber pointed out the link between Protestantism and free market capitalism, grounded in the Christian puritan ethic of the "calling" or the vocation. In Weber's thought, Protestantism was the first Christian expression that made the vocation of the merchant, the businessman acceptable, as "a calling". Money-making suddenly became respectable. Behind this however, Weber made two other observations which were really of greater weight. The first, was the way in which societies in the west had become increasingly predisposed to the "rational", to the organizational, to the bureaucratic, and where Protestantism in particular had encouraged this, stripped as it was, from the Reformation on, off those mystical Catholic rituals, which offered spirituality, depth, and enchantment. The second was that as Protestantism had weakened over the decades, it had left a dark legacy: societies slavishly bound to technology and driven by the sole consideration of efficiency. For Weber, this was and is the west's "iron cage": a sort of determinism, over which we have little power and even less freedom: least of all freedom for "brotherliness", for sisterliness, for social solidarity.

I think, in saying these things, Weber hit upon some of the major insights of the past 100 years. Rationalizing processes have diminished western societies to legal-bureaucratic entities, iron cages, disenchanted places where religious consciousness and spiritual depth is marginal. That is not to say that all things Christian are good: the sort of public witness of American evangelicals today is thoroughly disturbing, but this does not detract from Weber's insight of the shallowness of western secular modernity, its caged character, its closedness to any enchantment or hope from outside, beyond itself.

#### **The Gospel Reading: Matthew 21:23-32**

Let's now examine our Gospel reading from Matthew's Story of the Two Sons, through this lens of an "iron cage", a force that limits and constrains. Let's begin by asking, why does Matthew take

*this* story from the Jesus tradition, and include it in his Gospel: for no-one else does: it is unique to Matthew, it does not exist in Mark, Luke or John. Penetrating behind the veil of Matthew's community, it seems that there were a range of problems – welcome to human reality – where in particular, the community was dominated by two groups at odds with each other. The first, and the one that we will mention this morning, was the so-called *legalists*, those, who had reduced the faith to a set of rules – submission to the Jewish Law, to the Hebrew tradition. In short, these Christians had simply imported the body of Jewish law and determined that this was what Christianity, essentially was about.

For Matthew – the leader and theologian of the community – faith in Jesus Christ was much more than this: indeed this was little more than a cheap imitation of Christian faith. For Matthew, Christian faith was more than the Law, Christian faith was about spirituality as its deepest. Christian faith was about allowing the imagination to spread its wings, to fly. Christian faith was about breaking free of the iron cage, all iron cages – in order to celebrate the charism, the gift of freedom for love. Instead of a reduction of faith to rules and regulations, to codified laws and governance, Matthew dares his community to move from the safety and predictability of their cage, to the enchantment of what is possible through Christ. There is in Matthew a invitation for open-ness, for new thinking, for new attitudes and actions: in Weber's words, "brotherliness".

This is the import, the point of the Story of the Two Sons. Rather than signing up to the dogma and creed, the rules and regulations of the religious tradition, what actually counts is the celebration of life through stewardship for love and freedom, for those evangelical and human ends. Only then can Christianity be of any use in opening the iron cages of our world, so that human beings may fly. Then the world will become re-enchanted.