

Charles Campbell, professor of homiletics at Duke University, when commenting on today's gospel reading, shares this memory and amusing thought. He writes:

A few years ago, while channel surfing, I paused and watched part of an interview with television psychologist and celebrity Dr. Phil. At one point the interviewer asked Dr. Phil, "If you could interview anyone in the world, past or present, who would it be?" Dr. Phil replied, 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." As soon as Dr. Phil spoke, I remember thinking, "Oh no, you wouldn't! You would not want to sit down with Jesus, treat him like an interviewee, and ask him about the meaning of life. You would be crazy to do that. He would turn you upside down and inside out. He would confound all your questions and probably end up telling you to sell everything you own, give the money to the poor, and come, follow him. No, Dr. Phil, you do not really want to interview Jesus, and I do not want to either. It would not go well."

Dr. Campbell's point in telling this story is that conversations with Jesus are dangerous conversations. They are very dangerous because Jesus is always going to twist and turn your thinking, leave your head spinning, take you to new places, and leave you feeling confounded. Jesus cannot be captured or made to fit into our preconceived notions or perspectives. Jesus is **always** going to be moving us **beyond** the safety of our preconceived notions, perspectives, and ideas about God. And, quite honestly, when one of these dangerous conversations takes place, the

participants will rarely leave the encounter singing a hymn like, “Safe in the Arms of Jesus!”

As we encounter Jesus today, it is the final week of his life. Just one day earlier, he had entered Jerusalem accompanied by shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David,” as people were proclaiming him king. He then went to the temple and literally turned the tables, knocking them over as he drove out the money changers. He said the temple itself had become “a den of robbers.” It had been an eventful day, to say the least. Things are becoming intense and there is growing, even violent controversy between Jesus and the temple leadership. So, as we enter today’s reading, it is the morning of the next day, and Jesus has returned to the temple. As he enters, he is confronted by the chief priests and elders of the people who try to trap him with a question about *authority*. They think **they** are the ones who are in charge and they have **ultimate** authority at the temple. And, they demand to know, “By what authority are you doing these things?” Believing they have control and are in charge, they are ready to challenge whatever Jesus says.

Well, the chief priests and elders discover that challenging Jesus results in some very dangerous conversation. What they are **not** prepared for is hearing that Jesus’ authority comes **not** from another human being

but from **heaven**. Jesus avoids their trap and **figuratively** turns the tables on the religious leaders with a thorny question of his own, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin.” This is a very dangerous question because, in making a commitment about John’s *authority*, the religious leaders would also make a commitment about John’s witness to Jesus – and thus Jesus’ authority.

Oh yes, the tables have really been turned and the interviewee has now become the interviewer! Jesus outwits the religious leaders, places the question back on them and **unmasks** their deepest priorities and concerns. You see, the religious leaders are **not** really interested in Jesus’ true identity, and they are not interested in discovering how God would have them respond to Jesus. No, what they are **really** interested in is maintaining their privilege, power and control and **they** want to keep their current order intact. They want to keep Jesus in **their** tidy little box **or** have nothing to do with him.

Yes, this was a dangerous conversation indeed! The religious leaders are left speechless and the interview appears to have ended. But, Jesus does not stop. He knows they are off balance and confounded and so, he tells them a story – one of his favorite teaching tools. He tells of two sons. When the father directs the first son to go and work in the vineyard,

the mouthy and rebellious son emphatically answers, “I will not go.” But then, he changes his mind and goes anyway. The second son, who appears dutiful and obedient, answers that he will go, but then he does not. When Jesus asks his questioners which of the sons did the **will** of his father, they say, “The first.”

Again, this is a very dangerous conversation, indeed! According to this parable, those who are seemingly “in the know” (the religious leaders) are **not** the ones who are doing the **will of God**. Wow! The tables are again turned. You see, Jesus’ stories and questions are seldom about right answers; rather, they are about calling his followers and his hearers to **be** transformed. The question really is not “What is the will of God?” It is a much, much deeper question of who belongs in God’s realm or kingdom. And, through this exchange and his questions, Jesus convicts the scribes and elders of their lack of belief, and finally asserts that the despised, tax collectors and prostitutes will enter heaven before they will. Talk about dangerous conversation! This whole exchange begins with the “in the know” religious leaders authoritatively questioning Jesus, and it ends up with a pronouncement that **they** will be the ones who **follow** reviled tax collectors and shunned prostitutes into heaven.

Yes, conversations with Jesus are dangerous conversations! Jesus is **not** interested in simply talking with us about the meaning of life. He is always **confronting** us with the issue of **his** identity and the **call to faith** in him. Again today, Jesus is really asking the central question of the gospels: “Who do **you** say that I am?” And, Jesus is **not** about small talk or beating around the bush. Jesus wants our very lives, and he is going to do **whatever** it takes, even going to the extreme measure of ultimately dying on a cross, to unmask **our** deadly priorities, and call us to faith in him.

Friends, that call to faith is always a call to turn from the futile, deadly priorities in the world around us, to repent and turn back toward God, because then we find life that truly matters. God desires that we live into life that truly matters. Such life is the ultimate point in our reading from Ezekiel when we hear these words, “Turn, then, and live.” When we do this, we discover that our world and our lives become changed, so changed that we will likely face some kind of disruption, find our preconceived notions shattered and our heads spinning. But we also find that, when we turn toward God, we discover we are grasped by grace. We then respond to God’s call and grace as St. Paul says, by “letting the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus.” And, we find God is truly at work within our lives.

Yes, conversations with Jesus are dangerous, indeed. **We** do not begin by interviewing Jesus, but by **believing** in him, **trusting** in his authority, and **following** him to the places where he goes. And, in the process, our world **is** always going to be turned upside down and inside out, our heads left spinning and our tongues stammering. We also discover that no matter how much we think **we** are in control and in charge, whether it be our own lives, the circles in which we function and live, or even the community of faith, we are **not**. It is God alone who is in charge.

Yes, conversations with Jesus are dangerous indeed. Friends, just like the privileged religious leaders, we are always going to discover that our preconceived notions and perceptions of who Jesus is will always be shattered. Jesus will **never** be captured or controlled or fit into our little boxes. He is **always** going to disrupt the ways in which self-righteousness and privilege and piety and power try to control and manage. Jesus will **always** elude our grasp so that **we** may **be** grasped by him and by God's immeasurable grace and boundless love for all. And, when **we** realize that we have been grasped by God's grace, the tables have truly been turned. Then, we can truly celebrate and live into a love that is indiscriminate, boundless in mercy, and life-giving for **all**.