

Weekend of Sunday, September 27, 2020
17th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 26/Proper 21/Year A
First Reading: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Second Reading: Philippians 2:1-13
Gospel Reading: Matthew 21:23-32
Sermon Title: “Questioning Authority”

Theme

After driving the moneychangers out of the temple (21:12), Jesus begins teaching there. His authority is questioned by the religious leaders, who are supposed to be in charge of the temple.

Text

²³When [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” ²⁴Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” ²⁷So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

Sermon

Speaking of the timeline of Matthew's Gospel, we've just made quite a jump. Last week we were at the beginning of Chapter 20, which, according to Matthew's timeline is just before Jesus' Palm Sunday entrance into the holy city of Jerusalem, just before Passover.

Today's Gospel Reading is from the middle of Chapter 21, and that is after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to the shouts of hosanna. And then, according to Matthew, Jesus went right to the Temple and cleared out the merchants and the money changers. And that event is what set up the encounter with the ²³chief priests and the elders of the people."

In 1st Century Judaism, every community had a synagogue, which was presided over by a rabbi, who taught the Law of Moses. There was only one Temple, and it was in Jerusalem, the capital city of Judaism. The Temple was the only place where pilgrim Jews scattered all over the known world could go to make a sacrifice. The Temple was served by several priests, some of whom were known as the chief priests. The "elders of the people" that Matthew referred to were the Sanhedrin, essentially the administrative council of the Temple.

The merchants and money changers, who had set up tables on the Temple courtyard, were there to exchange national currency for Temple currency and to sell animals for sacrifice. They had a specific purpose to facilitate the worship and sacrifice of the Jews. While this is not the focus of the sermon today, I felt you needed to know that to know why the merchants and money changers were there at the Temple, and why Jesus ran them out, and why that upset the powers that be, and what the issue was that they wanted to talk to Jesus about. And for the record, the issue was authority; who has the power, what a surprise.

The encounter between Jesus and the chief priests and elders of the people actually happened the next morning when they noticed that Jesus had the boldness to show up at the Temple again and teach. I am certain they wanted to know what he was teaching too. "How dare this uneducated, uncredentialed upstart come in here and mess with our system and then start teaching the people his way!" they must have thought.

So the chief priests and the elders came up to Jesus and interrupted him and asked,
^{23b}"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

It's a good question, isn't it? Maybe you've asked it yourself in your place of work, or even in your home. I have a little secret for you. Here at Zion, most of the time I get my way. Most of the time, I work through the Ministry Tables and together we make a proposal to the Council, and most of the time the proposal goes the way I hoped it would. I can only think of one time that a Council decision went against my advice. I wanted to remove and get rid of those mobile partitions in Alber Hall and the Council said no, they weren't bothering anybody. Right now, some of the parents of the Confirmation students are asking me to consider making the class live and in-person rather than virtual. I have no problem with that, but it was the Study Table and the Council who decided to suspend all non-essential gatherings so I will take it to them to reconsider.

Another very similar contemporary question the chief priests and the elders might have asked would have been to ask what Jesus' credentials were. "What seminary did you go to Jesus? Under what master rabbi did you study?"

Our sister congregation, Martin Luther Lutheran Church just called a new pastor by the name of the Rev. Jeremy Hollingshead. As a member church of the ELCA, MLLC is required to call a pastor with the approved credentials of the ELCA. For example, they couldn't call an ordained Baptist minister to be their pastor. And what this credentialing assures is that the Christian faith expressed by the Lutheran tradition will be continued.

The chief priests and the elders knew who Jesus was. They knew his reputation. He was trouble before he came to Jerusalem and now they, the ones in charge, want to know who he thinks he is, doing the things he has done. So I doubt answers would have changed anything, their minds about him were already made up.

^{23b}"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

Jesus obfuscated. Jesus answered by asking them a question having to do with authority.

Now we could go into the question, discuss who John the Baptizer was, and the rationale that went through the leader's fussing for an answer. We could go into the little parable of the two spoiled bratty brothers. But I would like to continue the discussion we began last week because I think it is the perfect segue to this week's Gospel conclusion.

Last week, in a sermon entitled, "How Much Does God Love Me?" I referred to the First Reading from Jonah and the parable of the vineyard workers from the Gospel Reading. I said last week that these stories are not just biblical platitudes from antiquity given to us to ponder but have no real-time relevance, and then I mentioned some contemporary issues. And about those contemporary issues, I said, "Frankly, on those several issues, ... I don't care what your political opinion on them is. We can disagree as fellow citizens of this great country, but what we as Christians cannot disagree about is the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen?!"

Last week in the First Reading, Jonah finally decided to go and do what the LORD God told him to do. And in the Gospel Reading, we learned from Jesus that God alone is sovereign and whatever God does is good, even if it doesn't seem fair or right in our human understanding. The First Reading this week is nearly identical in message. The prophet Ezekiel argued with God about an issue of fairness and God told Ezekiel in no uncertain terms, that it was not God's ways that are unfair but their's, meaning Israel's.

In the Gospel Reading for today, Jesus told that terrible parable of the two spoiled bratty brothers – my mom would have grounded them both! – but in both the reading from Ezekiel and in Jesus' parable, there is grace. We human beings of all times and places are stubborn and impudent with God, and it is time we learned that it cannot be that way. The grace is that God comes to us over and over again through scripture and the Spirit to tell us that we need to change our ways or we just might miss out on the goodness of God that God has prepared for us.

So we all have a decision to make and it's really not complicated. Jesus has the credentials. He is

- the only Son of God,
- he is God incarnate
- he is the Christ – meaning the anointed one

- he is the example of godly living
- the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world
- he is the crucified one
- he is the resurrected one
- he is the ascended one
- he is the one who sits on the right hand of the Father
- where God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

So to the question, does Jesus have the credentials to have authority over our lives and every other life that ever lived? Let me tell you that the answer is an unequivocal, "YES!"

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Then the question becomes, how does our acknowledgment of the previous question, affect our lives? For me, there is only one answer – he is the Lord of my life, and as Lord of my life, what he says goes. I have no authority but his, I have no power but his.

Now being that we are human beings, we might take the position that the chief priests and the elders did and question Jesus – question his authority and credentials. Honestly, in the Second Reading, Paul gives me the impression that Jesus wouldn't be offended, but I'm not going to do it.

And we might live out our response to Jesus being Lord of our lives like the two bratty brothers. One said he would be obedient and wasn't, and the other started out being disobedient and then like Jonah, changed his mind. I guess that's better.

And true confessions, that is pretty close to how I live my life daily. Each moment of the day I have to ask myself if I want to live a godly life or go my own way – which in my mind often looks a lot more fun – but always, in the end, comes up short. If I go that direction I do not honor God, nor myself, nor anyone else. And potentially, I miss out on the glory of God that God promises to those who remain faithful.

So my decision has been made, and I reconsider it daily – that's just how I am. I wish I lived it out more solidly, but I am a human being. I believe this is what Paul meant when he said we are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in me, enabling me both to will and to work for his good pleasure. So I submit my life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And come what may, whatever good I do, I do for his glory. How about you?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, forgive us when we question your role in our lives. You gave all for us and yet, like brats, we turn our backs on you and go our own way. Forgive us, and guide us with your Spirit, so that in all we do we bring glory to you. We pray this in your name, which is above all names, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.