

"By Whose Authority?"

Matthew 21:23-32

September 28, 2008 – Proper 21

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Matthew 21:23-32

When he 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?" Jesus 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. Did 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?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So 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.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which 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. For 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.

Prayer.

Years ago I remember

Engaging in scholarly discussions

Weighing the risks verses the benefits

Of changing the Church from within

Or working for change from the outside.

You could make a lot more money working in the private sector.

That money could be directed towards more faithful missions than simply given over to general funds.

Lay members could advance in positions of Church leadership a lot faster than those in the competitive ranks of the ordained.

Or so the argument flowed.

But then, to the ordained was given

The stewardship of doctrine, what we believe,

Polity, how we relate,

"By Whose Authority?"

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The care and integrity of the Sacraments, and
To the ordained was given
A pedestal upon which one could stand and preach the Gospel.
Those are some pretty good-looking apples.
Throw in a guaranteed appointment and a secure retirement, and the temptation was
very strong to make the sacrifice, the seven-year investment, to become an ordained
elder.

Here I am Lord, send me.

As I have shared with you many times before,
I came into parish ministry with considerable spit and vinegar.
Cut the wasteful conference budget.
Invest in evangelism, growing congregations and planting new ones.
Champion the rights of women and children, advancing ethnic diversity, and serving
the poor and mentally challenged.
Purge the ranks of the old, the established, the conservative back-room politics, "old
boys network," preachers who dressed in black suits and wore rubbers over their wing
tips.
"Get rid of them; they're coasting to retirement anyways." Or so I thought.

Now, I've become one of them.

I look at my peers and see
Nearly every ordained member of the clergy
Become assimilated into the culture of organized religion.
Those who don't, leave.
Even as the ranks of elders has thinned and has largely become replaced by Local
Pastors, my hair has grayed, and I'm beginning to get thin on top.
Whereas I started out attempting to change the Church, it was finally the culture of
decline and secularism that has done the changing to the Church.
Pop Warner football, and similar phenomena, have done way more to negatively shape
the church as any positive I could have done to build Her up.

The Board of Ordained Ministry chairperson sought out Jesus teaching and asked, "By
whose authority are you doing what you are doing?"
"Who said you can do that?"
Jesus refuses to be caught.
Like a svelte politician, he re-stakes the playing field to one of his own choosing.
Jesus chooses the hot topic of his era, and he gives them two losing choices.
Instead of choosing a bad answer, they clam up and say "We do not know."
Neither will answer; it's a tie.
But is it?
Jesus has effectively claimed equal authority as the "authorities."

And they've ceded it to him.

Jesus is never one to pass on a teachable moment.
Taking the newly won momentum,
Jesus launches into a fictional riddle to go for the check, mate, and win.
This time, the answers are not equal.
There is a right answer.

***It is better to act righteously
Than it is to say you will, but don't follow through.***

We all know this is the moral high ground.

Don't tell me that you love me; show me that you love me.
Don't tell the unemployed that it's going to get better, give them a job.
Don't tell the hungry that you're going to feed them. Start cooking.
Don't tell the homeless you feel their pain. Get out a hammer and saw and start building.
Don't tell me that I'm welcome, unless you are prepared for me to stay.

Like the religious authorities of Jesus' day
We all know the right answer.
It's better to walk the walk, than it is to talk the talk.
Good, Jesus tells them,
Sinners are going into the kingdom ahead of you.

What?

You heard me right: tax collectors and prostitutes go to the front of the line.
The Pope, the bishop, the clergyman, and the members of the Leadership Council have to move to the back of the line.

Why?

Because when John showed you the way, you didn't believe him.
Sinners believed, but you didn't.
Sinners changed, but organized religion held fast.
We should have prepared the way of the Lord, like John said.
Did someone say, "But we've always done it our way!"

But that isn't fair!

We followed the rules.

Life isn't fair; weren't you listening to last Sunday's sermon?¹

Some people will get a full day's wage even if they only work the final hour.

¹ Based on Matthew 20:1-16, "Fairness V. Grace" as archived at:
<http://www.geocities.com/kittycatalien/Zion/sermons/092108.pdf>

Apparently in the kingdom of God
Faithful belief
Trumps the Law
Ten out of ten times.
Jesus wants our belief to motivate our charitable acts
Not legalism, dogma, or doctrine;
Not fear of death, punishment, or hell.
Faithful belief convicts one to be merciful, to act with compassion, to share the hunger,
to be humble, to make peace, and to live with purity of heart.
These are **action** verbs
Because belief is either active
Or dead.
This, then, is faith:
The willing
Filled with the breath of the Spirit
Raising up and giving life to dry bones, making a kingdom of disciples.

Unfortunately, too many demand to be spoon-fed their religion:
Tell me just what I need to know.
Make it black and white.
For the Church to be the living, growing Body of Christ,
We must grow up.
We must mature our faith
And go from being spoon-fed what to believe
To being Spirit led disciples of Christ
Doing his will
Creating his kingdom.
Black and white Christianity
Is like the barren fig tree Jesus curses.
But living, breathing faith:
That's what the Lord requires.

It is easy for me to stand up here and to do all the blaming;
To do all the pointing.
But I'm smart enough to know that change begins with the self.
I have to become the change I seek to create.²
And so do you.
I have to become the one who moves beyond
Satisfaction with a righteous belief in law and order
To living a Spirit filled,
Spirit driven,
And Spirit led life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² A paraphrase of Mohandas Gandhi