

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16  
Matthew 21:23-32

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
September 27, 2020

## **By What Authority?**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our Psalm today is a hymn of praise to God for his liberation of the people from Egyptian bondage. In their time of need God sustained them, bestowing grace and redeeming love. Listen to these words from Psalm 78:1-4 and 12-16...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson we read of the authority of Jesus being questioned by the chief priests and elders. Then we hear “The Parable of the Two Sons,” in which the mercy of God is extended to those who we might not expect to be eligible for such mercy. Listen to these words from Matthew 21:23-32...

### *Sermon*

It is reported that a few years ago Dr. Phil was asked by an interviewer, “If you could interview anyone in the world, past or present, who would it be?” Without hesitation Dr. Phil replied, “Jesus Christ. I would like to interview Jesus Christ. I would like to have a conversation with him about the meaning of life.”

Professor of Preaching at Duke Divinity School, Charles Campbell, suggests that Dr. Phil should think twice about interviewing Jesus. “He would turn you upside down and inside out. He would confound all your questions and probably end by telling you to ‘sell everything you own, give the money to the poor, and come, follow me.’”

The chief priest and elders in our Gospel Lesson are not really interested in Jesus’ authority or identity. They are interested in maintaining their own privilege and power. But they

discover that conversations with Jesus are dangerous. They should be careful whom they interrogate. The twists and turns come so fast they are left with their heads spinning, confused and confounded.

There are two events recorded by Matthew in chapter 21 which provide the context and atmosphere for our lesson this morning. The first is Jesus' "entry into Jerusalem," accompanied by shouts of "Son of David" (21:9), a result of which says Matthew, "the whole city was in turmoil." The second is the "cleansing of the temple" with Jesus driving out all who were selling and buying in the temple, knocking over the tables of the money changers, and calling the temple itself a "den of robbers" (21:13). The next morning he returns to the temple, where he is confronted by the chief priests and elders of the people, who demand to know, "By what authority are you doing these things?" (21:23) Our lesson then is to be understood in the context of tension and controversy.

The "these things" that Jesus was asked about probably does not refer solely to the disruption of the temple but to the whole of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, a ministry which had stirred the city and attracted large and favorable crowds. "These things" apparently included other incidences that we find in this 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Matthew: the healing of the blind and lame, the cursing of the fig tree, as well as his "teaching" in general. In the eyes of the leaders, Jesus was an "unauthorized" troublemaker.

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" In response Jesus first counters with a question about the authority of the ministry of John the Baptist. 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." (21:25b-27a)

Since these leaders believe they are the ones with authority, they are prepared to challenge whatever Jesus says. What they are not prepared for is Jesus' authority coming from heaven.

Yes, it's easy for us to judge the chief priests and elders. We already know the story and can readily point our finger at them. But aren't we sometimes just like them in our tendency to keep things just as they are, to maintain the status quo? Perhaps we should consider *our* resistance to change, to being transformed. What is our response to a change in organizational structure, time of meeting, program, staff, order of worship? What is our response to a change in our health, family relationships, and all the changes relative to the viral pandemic?

Here Jesus offers three parables, the first of which occupies our attention today.

“What do you think? A man had two sons...(28a)

He summoned the first and sent him to work in the vineyard. The son declines, but later on he changes his mind and goes. Then the father spoke to his second son just as he had to the first. And this son agrees to go, but then doesn't.

Now Jesus addresses his hearers. They are pictured in Matthew's narrative as “chief priests and elders of the people” in the temple precincts, but in fact Christian audiences are now hearing Matthew's gospel, so that they become the people to whom Jesus' question is put.

Then Jesus asks his hearers to tell him which of the two sons had actually done “the will of his father.” And they answered, “The first.” We know that it is not “saying” but “doing” which is important. Words without deeds, like faith without works, are vain and empty.

Jesus had just told the parable of the fig tree in Chapter 21:18-22. The fig tree had the look of health, but it was fruitless and so was condemned to wither and die. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, false prophets wearing sheep's clothing are to be judged, not on their

words, but on their deeds. Many will come before Christ with the right words, hailing him as “Lord,” but he will tell them to depart if they are doers of evil deeds and not doers of the will of God. (Mt. 7:15-23)

“Which of the two sons did the will of his father?” In a sense, neither. But it seems that the best answer to Jesus’ question is the son who first said “No,” who at first seemed disobedient, but had a change of heart and went to work in the vineyard. To those who have refused God’s direction, this parable assures us that a person can change. That the past does not determine the future. A bad decision or a hastily spoken word does not eternally set us outside God’s good graces. A call refused can be reconsidered.

And Jesus draws a conclusion: John the Baptist had come “in the way of righteousness,” calling people to examine their lives, give up their sinful ways, and “bear fruit appropriate to repentance.” But who had heeded John’s summons to walk that new path? Tax collectors and harlots, people whose behavior was all wrong, just like the first son. They were the ones whose lives were at first a clear “No” to God. But in time, in response to John’s proclamation, they repented and began to do God’s will. The leaders, on the other hand, were like the second son. They had the look of obedience and respectability, and yet they did not heed the voice of God, not even when they saw crowds of other people flocking to John and repenting.

Neither the harlots nor the tax collectors were part of the community. Both were ostracized and cut off. In contrast to them stood the chief priests and elders. They were the insiders. They embodied the establishment. They were the bearers of the tradition and the benefactors of the tradition. They were the hierarchy. You might say they were the swamp. We should not be surprised then that they were the ones quick to say, “Yes.”

Our Psalm 78 lesson recalls the political inversion wrought by God when little, insignificant Israel was delivered from mighty Egypt. And there in the barren wilderness, God, like a good shepherd, led them safely through the valley of the shadow of death.

Jesus is the One who placed himself with the disenfranchised, that we might all have life in his name. One who washed his disciples' feet. Who revealed the searching love of God by eating with tax collectors and sinners. The Good Shepherd who would leave the ninety and nine for the one lost sheep. One who told of a father who embraced a returning prodigal son who had shamed his father and squandered all that the father had given him. For God's love in Jesus Christ is very wide and very deep. The baptismal waters welcome everyone. The table where Jesus is host is a table for all.

There's an amazing story from an autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi, who won freedom for India by preaching nonviolence. During his early days in South Africa—in Pretoria—Gandhi inquired into Christianity. He said:

... I came in contact with another Christian family. At their suggestion I attended the Wesleyan church every Sunday. For these days I also had their standing invitation to dinner. The church did not make a favorable impression on me. The sermons seemed to be uninspiring. The congregation did not strike me as being particularly religious. They were not an assembly of devout souls; they appeared rather to be worldly-minded people, going to church for recreation and in conformity to custom. (*Gandhi: An Autobiography*)

Gandhi therefore concluded that there was nothing in Christianity which he did not already have. And he was lost to the Christian church with great consequences to India and the rest of the world.

Any of us can become blind to what God is doing in the world around us. Church work can degenerate into little more than maintaining an institution, with little excitement about what our great and gracious God is doing. Preachers can preach as though nothing were at stake.

Consequently, there is little enthusiasm for evangelism and renewal. We say we are going to work in the vineyard, but instead of planting and tending vines and harvesting grapes, instead of asking the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers, we spend our time rearranging stones along the path.

The question of Jesus' authority is important. If his authority is from people, then the church is just another human institution among other human institutions, a sort of civic club, if you will. What Jesus is saying, both in his question to the religious leaders about John's baptism and in his question about which of the two sons did the will of the father, is that it is the God of Israel who gives him his authority to do "these things." The God of heaven and earth. And what he wants of us is a transformation like those sinners who at first said "no," but then repented, and went to work in God's vineyard.

What do *you* think? A man had two sons....

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.