

Proper 21A 2020 Sermon

Matthew 21:23-32

When 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?" 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.

Today's Gospel passage cannot be fully understood without knowing its context. It is the last week of Jesus' earthly life. He has just come into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and the first thing he does is go to the Temple and overturn the tables of the moneychangers and drive out those who are selling sacrificial animals. (Matt. 21:12-13)

It is a bold and scandalous act. For what Jesus is doing is not only challenging the whole Jewish religious power structure, which was centered around the Temple; he is threatening the very livelihood of the chief priests and elders and the financial basis of Jerusalem's economy. For animal sacrifices were not only *mandated* by Jewish law, they also brought huge amounts of money into the Temple treasury and into the pockets of middle- and upper-class folk in Jerusalem. Who were the **only** people authorized to *perform* those mandated sacrifices? The Temple priests. And who were the members of the ruling Jewish Council? The elders.

And so, it is not surprising that, as today's Gospel story opens, the chief priests and elders confront Jesus about his outrageous actions:

“By what authority do you do such things?” they demand. Jesus holds no official position in the Jerusalem Temple; unlike the chief priests and elders, Jesus has no institutionally-recognized authority.

And yet, the common people understand that *Jesus* is the one who holds **true** authority. We are told that after Jesus had finished his long Sermon on the Mount, “the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for **he** taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” (Matthew 7:28-29, NRSV) And yet, Jesus had not been **given** authority by the Jewish religious establishment.

Where does authority derive from?

One place authority can come from is institutions. A Board of Directors and stockholders of a corporation choose a CEO, and thereby give that CEO institutional authority over the company. We elect our political leaders, and thereby give them institutional authority over our cities, counties, states, and nation. The Episcopal Church ordained me, giving me authority to celebrate Eucharist, pronounce blessing and absolution, and to preach. These are examples of institutionally given and recognized authority.

But authority which is *given* by **institutions** may not necessarily be *recognized* or *accepted* by the people who are members, employees, or citizens of the institution. I may have the authority within the structure of the Episcopal Church to preach to you, but if you do not trust my spirit, trust that I am truly seeking God in my life and am trying to live by Christ’s love and example, trust that I love you and care about you, then you will not *receive* what I say as authoritative for you. Pope Francis holds perhaps the most authoritative institutional position in all of Christianity; and yet some members of his own Roman Catholic Church have called him a heretic, and do not **recognize** his authority over them. In our own State of Colorado, our Governor has issued a statewide mandate, which has the force of law, that everyone over the age of 11 must wear a mask when in public indoor spaces. And yet some citizens of Colorado see that law as having no authority over them.

Authority may come from the top; but it **must** also be *received* from the bottom. **True** *authority* isn’t one-way; it’s relational.

And that is what differentiates *authority* from mere *power*. People high up in an institution's hierarchy may exercise power over their subordinates. But power without relationship is not authority; it is authoritarianism. Jesus once said to his disciples, "You know that the rulers of nations have absolute power over people, and their officials have absolute authority over people. But that's **not** the way it's going to be among you. Whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be most important among you will be your slave. It's the same way with the Son of Man. He didn't come so that others could serve *him*. He came to **serve** and to give his life as a ransom for many people." (Matthew 20:25-28, GW)

Richard Rohr asks the question: "Why is it that Mother Teresa could stand up before crowds of thousands and repeat simple New Testament phrases and seemingly pious clichés, and still blow people away?!"

"She didn't say anything new: 'Jesus loves you,' she assured us. 'We're all sons and daughters of God, and we have to love Jesus' poor.' Yet people walked out [from her presence] renewed, transformed, and converted.

"She wasn't a priest or minister. She wasn't well educated. [She was barely 5' tall.] Her authority came from her lifestyle, her solidarity with human suffering, and thus her pure goodness.

"Loving servanthood and foundational surrender are the **true** basis for teaching authority in the Church, much more than title, vestment, role, or office. Such lives have the living authority of Jesus himself, and need no special ordination or public validation."¹

"The world as it operates," says Fr. Rohr, "is largely about power; the world as it *should* be, or 'the Reign of God,' is always about love."²

Power comes from position; *genuine* authority comes from love, which is the very identity of the Author of all things, the supreme Author-ity. "We know how much God loves us," wrote St. John, "and we have put our trust in [that] love." (1 John 4:16, NLT2)

And isn't that where true authority derives from? *Trust* in the person wielding the authority? Trust that that person cares; that that person wants what is best for us and for the whole; that person is willing to sacrifice out of love for us?

What is ironic about today's Gospel passage is that Jesus, who holds **true** authority, will, in a few short days, submit to the **power** wielded by the self-preserving Jewish institutional leaders and the local Roman government. The Author of Life will allow loveless power to put him to death on a cross. And by that act of sacrificial love, "a perfect sacrifice for the whole world,"³ he shows us what **true** authority looks like.

AMEN

1 Adapted from *Radical Grace: Daily Meditations*, pp. 384-385, Day 399)

2 (https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Daily-Meditation--The-Reign-of-God---September-20--2012.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=SWmzhEGPieM&fbclid=IwAR1hsjhep4g22TSp5DwEAWIZUOB73nJPqKTwMMRjIAUvMn6_q4T3AHk-Jk)

3 Eucharistic Prayer A, *Book of Common Prayer 1979*, p. 362