

Matthew 21:23-32

Pentecost 17 + Proper 21A + September 27, 2020

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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Authority

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

When Jesus enters the temple, the chief priests and elders hurl the charge at Him: "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" Before we look at the answer, we should take a look at what "authority" is, and what "these things" are.

The easy one first. What are "these things" that Jesus been doing? It's Monday of Holy Week. For three years, Jesus has been teaching and working all sorts of miracles. Just the day before, He's come riding into Jerusalem to the hosannas of the crowds, and He's healed a lot of people. Oh, and He's also made a whip and cleared the moneychangers out of the temple, which is why the chief priests and elders are madder than usual. These are "these things" that Jesus has been doing.

On to authority. Authority is the power to do something, to perform some act or enforce some law. Authority is given or conferred, which makes it different from ability. If you have an ability, you have the means or the skill to get something done. If you have authority, you have the calling and the right to do it.

We live in an age that resists authority and exalts ability, so you run into people who say, "I can do whatever I'm able to do." This sounds marvelously free, but it's too often the path to terrible chaos. For instance, a man has the ability to have many children with many women, but he has authority from God to have children with one woman – and this authority is given publicly through a rite called marriage. Likewise, it's not rocket science to read some Bible verses while standing near bread and wine, but not everyone has the authority to celebrate Holy Communion. That authority is given publicly by means of a call and ordination. A lot of people can see when you're breaking the speed limit, but only certain people are authorized to give you a ticket – and that authority is marked by a badge. (If someone impersonates such authority, it's a crime!) It's remarkable how many problems can be solved when people stick with what they are authorized to do.

Here's an example that happens in worship; though if it's happened here, it's been a *long* time, which is why I can use it. A child misbehaves during the service and causes a distraction, and the parents do little about it; so another worshiper takes it upon himself to tell the child to be quiet. This turns into the discussion of, "Who gave you the right to discipline my kid?" and "If you won't do it, somebody else has to." We pastors just live to mediate these disputes (my sarcasm runs high today), because both sides want us to say that they are right. The truth is that both are wrong – the parents didn't exercise the authority that was given to them, while the other worshiper exercised authority that wasn't given to him. If everybody does what they are given to do, things go along quite well.

You can see the same problem on a larger, more destructive scale in the civil unrest we witness these days. Rioters claim they have the right to hurt people and destroy things because of some wrong; but they are assuming authority that no one has given them, so they rely on moronic logical fallacies like, "If one law enforcement official misuses his authority, all of them do and all of the time." (We would point out that *all* rioters are wrong, *all* of the time, because they have no authority.) When authorities let them riot, the authorities are abandoning the authority given to them. This leads to the third party, the vigilante, who says, "If the authorities aren't going to keep order, I'm going to keep order." But apart from specific provisions in the law, civilians aren't authorized to keep order. What a mess.

I'm drifting away from the text, I know, but this is important. When you're trying to sort out some difficult problem, one of the questions to ask is, "Who has authority? Who is using their authority to do the right thing, and who is not?" Trust me: it clarifies a lot of things. It also makes what Jesus does that much more remarkable, which gets us back to the text.

By what authority does Jesus heal people and cleanse the temple? Remember what you just said in the Creed: Jesus is God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God: it's pretty arrogant for anyone to ask Him, "Who do You think You are?" But here's the thing: Jesus doesn't claim authority for Himself. You can see this throughout the gospels, but it's especially evident in John: Jesus does what He does because the Father has given Him authority to do it. He becomes flesh because His Father sends Him. He judges because His Father gives Him all judgment (Jn. 5:22). He speaks because the Father teaches Him (Jn. 8:28). He dies because it is His Father's will (Mt. 26:39). He rises again because His Father raises Him (Lk. 9:22). If you're wondering why Jesus has to submit to His Father's authority if He's equally God, you're asking the wrong question. He doesn't have to, but He does because authority is a good thing; and if Jesus is happy to respect and receive authority, go and do likewise.

But this is even more startling: Jesus submits to the authority of Herod and Pontius Pilate. In fact, when Pilate demands of Jesus, "Do you not know that I have authority to release You and authority to crucify You?" (John 19:10), Jesus tells Pilate that Pilate has that authority from Him – and then He submits to Pilate's unjust death sentence, even though Pilate's a crook and Jesus has enough power to reduce him to ashes with one word. Next time you're thinking of defying authority just because you think they're incompetent, remember Jesus' example. Remember, too, what we heard recently from Romans 13, that "whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment" (Romans 13:2).

All that said, when the chief priests and elders ask Him, "By what authority are you doing these things?", He doesn't tell them. They're trying to trap Him: however He answers, they want to accuse Him of blasphemy. Besides, they should know already! They've been watching Him fulfill prophecy for three years, after all. They don't care what the answer is, as long as they can use it to destroy Him.

Jesus instead turns the trap on them, asking, "The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" They can't say, "from heaven," because they rejected John. They can't say "not from heaven," because they're afraid of the crowd. Hypocritically, they say, "We do not know;" and so they prove that they don't really care about the truth.

The tragedy of the chief priests and elders is that, despite the Word that they know and have seen fulfilled, they will not believe in Jesus. And because they refuse that gift of faith, they have to get rid of the One who gives it. In all of this, they are abusing the authority given to them: as chief priests and elders of the people, they are given to teach the people the Word of God and to point them to the Messiah. Yet here they are, face-to-face with the Messiah, plotting to trap and destroy Him.

Some will surmise from this that Jesus is a failure: if He can't even get the leaders on board, then what sort of a Messiah is He? Here's a remarkable thing again: the Son of God, who has all power and all authority, uses His power and authority to give, not force, salvation. What's more, He does it by sacrifice – rather than use His power to abolish sinners, He humbles Himself and takes their sin on Himself, dying in their place. Why? Because that is what His Father has given Him authority to do.

The chief priests and elders might not believe it, but others do. Jesus says that the tax collectors and the prostitutes will enter the kingdom of heaven before they do. That's what the parable in the second half of our gospel reading is about. The chief priests and the elders are the second son who says he'll work but doesn't, and you expect them to be in the vineyard because they're the ones who claim to be doing the will of the Father; but here they are opposing the Son. The tax collectors and prostitutes are the first son in the parable: at first, they are the ones who are lost in sin and opposing the Father; but

later when they see that Jesus has come to forgive sins, they repent and gladly receive the gift of salvation.

What does this have to do with authority? Remember that we said before, that there's always going to be trouble when people resist those who are given authority, or when they claim authority that hasn't been given. What is Jesus authorized by His Father to do? Jesus is authorized to seek and to save the lost, culminating in His death on the cross for the sins of the world. The chief priests and elders don't want this: they don't want a Messiah who bleeds and dies and saves through suffering, so they reject Jesus. In doing so, they also reject that God the Father has given Him the authority to do just that. Instead, they claim the authority to teach a different salvation: namely, they teach that good people with unremarkable sins will go to heaven, while bad people with notorious sins won't.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes, though, they welcome Jesus for exactly who He is and what He has come to do. They're sinful people who know that they have no chance of working their way into heaven, and so they welcome the One who has authority to forgive.

Does that make sense? Then here's the next question: because He is ascended into heaven, what has Jesus authorized His Church to do? The answer is that He authorizes His Church to continue the work of giving out the forgiveness of sins. That's what He's doing when He says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing ... and teaching them." That's what He's doing when He tells His disciples, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld" (John 20:23). This is why He tells His people to eat and drink His body and blood often, because it is for the forgiveness of sins. This is why St. Paul reports that he endeavored to preach nothing among the people except Christ and Him crucified.

If a pastor and congregation depart from this, they are no longer operating under the authority of Jesus. You can find churches that talk about politics, social change, social justice, living life to its fullest, making lots of dough, etc. – and note that you can find a lot of other people droning on about the same things. It might be edifying stuff. It might be evil stuff. Either way, though, it's a problem if a church isn't doing what Jesus has authorized it to do.

Or to put it positively, wherever you find pastor and people who are about the forgiveness of sins, that's cause for joy. And if you depart from church knowing that your sins are forgiven in Christ, then blessed are you. Indeed, blessed are you because you know by whose authority Jesus does these things; because while He didn't tell them that day, the crucified and risen Savior has made it clear to you.

The One who has all authority, both now and forevermore, says that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen