

18th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 21A
Sermon 10.1.23

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. (296)

This is one of those lessons we've learned so well that it's no longer surprising, to say nothing of disturbing. Authority might arrive outside of established lines. Authority might arrive without any endorsing apparatus. A great writer might show herself though not having earned an M.F.A. A great mind might show itself though not having earned a degree of any kind. Greatness, righteousness can arrive mysteriously.

In fact, that might be our favorite kind. The preternatural. The spontaneous. We're very comfortable with this idea.

Perhaps even too comfortable.

(But of course, I would say that, right? I speak as one credentialed. I've come up through the established lines and occupy this pulpit rightly. So, of course, I'd begrudge the wielding of authority where it hasn't been earned.

Be clear, please: I'm the bad guy in this parable.)

Jesus is in the Temple. He has arrived where he's been heading. He has arrived into the last week of his life. In four days, he will be crucified. In six days, he will have been resurrected. As for the day before this, that's when he entered the city through the gate, and crowds followed him. Crowds acclaimed him. "Hosanna!" they cried out and threw their cloaks in his path. Royal treatment it was, if a shabby show of it. The dusty cloaks of peasants were hardly the purple

carpeting of the king. Whatever: “Hosanna in the highest heaven! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna!”

Next thing he did was attack the Temple, the sellers of sacrificial animals in the Temple courts. But you probably know this right? Even those who don’t know many Jesus stories know this one. He knocked over their tables. Their coins went flying.

The thing is the sellers of animals for sacrifice were very much allowed there. There was nothing filthy about what they were doing. This wasn’t cheap or crass, a crass desecration of an otherwise sacred space. No, people would come to the Temple to worship. They would come from far away. And for worship, people needed animals for sacrifice.

That’s what happened in the Temple—the sacrifice of certain animals in accordance with the Law of God. That’s what stopped happening when the Temple fell, when Rome destroyed it, which would happen between the time when Jesus lived and the time when this gospel narrative was written. By the time “Matthew” set word to parchment, the Temple was destroyed, the people were scattered, and the practice of the Jews would be utterly undone and then remade. A people of the book. A practice in homes formed by the study of the book.

But when Jesus lived, the Temple was still bustling, the power center for all things religious, political, and civil. And the sellers of animals for sacrifice were there very much in keeping with what was right. If you travel all this distance in order to worship as outlined in the Law, you couldn’t be expected to get your sacrificial animal safely there. It had to be flawless. It had to be without blemish—whether a sparrow or a lamb. And the long trip would have practically guaranteed it would arrive to the Temple altar blemished. Long journeys always bring signs of wear. So, you save your coins, and you buy one there—the perfect sparrow, the lamb without blemish. The sellers in the Temple would have such things on offer, as was right, as was dictated in the Law of righteousness.

But then Jesus comes along and he throws all these things around, overturns their tables, sends their coins flying. It’s like if he were to come in here and throw our communion elements to the ground.

On what authority would he do such a thing?

That’s the question the chief priests and elders of the people asked him then, which begins our reading this morning. On what authority is he doing any of this?

It’s not a bad question, and they’re not bad for asking it, though that might be hard for us to hear since we’re used to these being the bad guys by this point. It’s the likes of these who’ve long

been showing up in opposition to Jesus, whom we know as the good guy. It's the likes of these—the religious authorities, the Pharisees, the scribes, the chief priests—who are always giving Jesus a hard time. At this point, we struggle to hear them as anything but the bad guys.

Which is unfortunate because it drains some of the original impact of the story. Time was these were the *good* guys. Time was, when Jesus lived and when “Matthew” wrote, these were the ones you could trust.

Sort of.

I mean, people probably also sort of knew that the obvious authorities weren't necessarily in it for the right reasons or weren't operating always and exclusively to righteous ends. People probably had had their share of frustrating interactions with those who were in charge, or even painful interactions with those who were supposed to execute justice or practice mercy.

That said, for the most part, these were probably accepted as the good guys because, well, what choice did the people have? What choice do any of us have? We need authorities we can trust, so we'll end up trusting those in authority even if they're not always so trustworthy because, again, what choice to we have?

For all this, Jesus utterly disrupting authoritative practice, Jesus utterly disrupting things done with the blessing of those in charge: this isn't altogether good news. This won't, practically speaking, make things all better. Even the people in society who tend to get forgotten or left behind or altogether crushed by the structures and strictures of authorized practice won't celebrate the undoing of authorized practice. Some of the people least eager to “defund the police” are some of the most policed people in our society, Black people in broken neighborhoods who are wary of the police but are just as wary of life without them. Who knows what hell would break loose if no one was there with keys and cuffs, Tasers and guns? Many of us White people who want better justice would defund all that at others' risk.

This disruption. This disruption! On what authority was he doing these things? It's not a bad question, and the elders weren't bad for asking it. And of course, Jesus doesn't offer a straightforward answer. True to form, Jesus' reply is as enigmatic as anything, while also troubling.

He brings up John.

And I know that John was never far from Jesus' mind—but he might be from yours, so here's a primer. John was Jesus' cousin. Six months older than Jesus, his father was the Temple priest Zechariah, and his mother was Elizabeth, old when she bore him, and kinswoman to Jesus' mother Mary, young when she bore him. It's probably for this that Mary, when she was pregnant

with Jesus, went to stay with Elizabeth. Older, more experienced, Elizabeth probably served as friend and guide to young Mary.

Years later, John would be the herald of the Messiah, the one who would tell the people to prepare the way of the Lord and who would baptize any and all in the commanding hope of repentance, that change of mind that changes lives, even the lives of people so beyond hope like tax collectors and prostitutes.

But he did this from the wilderness. Though he was born very much into the house of the establishment, though John was very much a child of established lines of authority (the son of a Temple priest!), he yet left it all and went out to the wilderness where he would dress in clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and would eat a rough diet of locusts and wild honey. Really, he could have done all this from within the Temple. He could have changed the system from the inside. Right? I mean, isn't that right? Can't that be done?

Or can't it be done?

In spite of all this, significant as John clearly is, and was, perhaps especially to Jesus, I was never quite clear on what Jesus meant in bringing up John *here*, asking as he did, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" What did he mean by asking this pointed question as to whether the chief priests and elders *believed* in John? What was there to believe in about John? Because John never claimed a special status of any kind. Indeed, he disowned his special status, and then cut his own path. So, what was there to *believe* in about John, to *believe* in about the baptism he brought?

Josephus helps here, Flavius Josephus who was a Roman-Jewish soldier and later historian, writing history of the sort that wouldn't become common until much later. Really, Josephus was way ahead of his time when it comes to recording history for its own sake. Though, of course, he had a point of view and even an agenda, his works nonetheless provide crucial accounting for what life was like during this pivotal time in human history—Galilee, and wider Judea, in the late 1st century.

Of John the Baptizer he wrote: "When others too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod [the Jewish king of Judea] became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything they did."

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This is important insight into the power that John apparently wielded in Jesus' time. Whenever we hear of John, as we often do in church, it's always in relation to Jesus. He is, according to the gospel narratives, as the moon who but reflects the light of the sun, which here is understood as Jesus. But John, it's important to know, was himself a wielder of light, which light the established authorities would understand as better dimmed. John was himself a danger to the established powers—and not simply for his having left these same established powers but for his having terrific power unto himself.

An orator. A charismatic, forceful man of great eloquence. I didn't know that.

So, the question is whether the elders and chief priests had the wisdom and also the courage to recognize power when it shows up uncredentialed—which power then does indeed change lives, makes them better. Could they though recognize it?

It's a question Jesus plays out in his parable. Which is the one more closely dwelling in the kingdom of God, the one who says but doesn't do or the one who does though at first refusing? Which is the one more closely akin to God who is truth, to God who is justice, the one with all the right words, all the right credentials, or the one who comes around eventually?

Well, we're Americans, at least for the most part, I imagine. We gathered here in church this morning are Americans and there's almost nothing Americans love more than someone whose greatness seems to come out of nowhere. A country born in revolution, the shaking off of birthright and old ways, ours would have us even regard greatness that arrives out of the blue as a great qualification for certain jobs. Some of our most powerful politicians, for example, have the most zealous following because of their inexperience, because of their being (or claiming to be) "outsiders" in Washington.

And we're not unwise to trust this story at least as much as we trust in credentialing. It's not unheard of that people with all the right credentials turn out to be corrupt or self-serving or without compassion or imagination. But it's against the spirit of the parable simply to reconfigure credentialing. Tax collectors and prostitutes aren't themselves to be trusted as embodying the new way righteousness shows up. No, it's actually more confounding than that. It's that knowing who to trust as coming close to God is not as cut and dried as it always involving priests or it always involving prostitutes. The challenge is that it always involves discernment, it always involves seeking and sensing and trusting and checking in again.

Ultimately, though, it involves the one appearing as great now letting that greatness pour out, not using greatness to continue to be the best but rather understanding such greatness as made full in service, made full of purpose in its pouring out.

The purpose of power is in service of the good, the just, the true. That's what power is for.

The word for it is *kenosis*, a word Paul uses in his letter to the Philippians, which we used as a call to worship this morning. Here Paul writes of Jesus as one who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but instead emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. And it is for this reason that God also highly exalted him. And it is for this reason, too, that we can trust him—that no demand he made of others wasn't one he refused to meet himself, and no cost he asked others to pay for doing the works of lovingkindness in the world wasn't a cost he was also, and even more so, willing to pay.

That's the standard. That's the credentialing, if you will.

I know a Navy SEAL. Retired now, he works at the McChrystal Group. I went to high school with him and saw him at the last reunion. In close partnership with General McChrystal, he studies leadership, and he asked me if I thought robots could ever serve as commanders in battle.

"No," I said, knowing very little of what he knows.

"Why not?" he asked, which remembering this conversation has me wondering why thought to ask me such things.

"Because the one in charge has to have at least as much at stake as the ones asked to follow."

He seemed to agree, and maybe even to have decided.

I shudder to think what such decision amounted to. Did I endorse sending people into battles that I wouldn't myself fight? It's easy to speak. You can do it over lunch at a high school reunion. It's so much harder to do, to put yourself on the line, to pour your labor out until exhausted.

The one we follow did both, he himself a speech-act, the word of God made active for the purpose of love in the world.

Let's listen for it. Let's keep watch. And then let's do likewise.

Thanks be to God.