

## **Pentecost 17A, Proper 21. Matt. 21:23-32. September 27, 2020.**

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” On one level, this passage looks like just another of Jesus’ sparring matches with the established religious authorities. They challenge him, he outwits them, and then he tells a parable whose moral isn’t that polite to them but is joy to those who are too often left out by the official leaders. But this particular sparring match is excruciatingly relevant to our lives right now, because it is about who has authority to use power, where that authority comes from, and what they do with that authority. And as we grit our teeth and seethe through what looks to be a very difficult election season, these questions of authority and what is done with it lie behind much of what is driving us to distraction, causing us to fear, and tempting us to lash out from that fear. In this passage, Jesus disrupts the established order of authority, as he still does.

But to understand what’s going on in our reading and in this question, we need to know what “these things” are. It is hidden by the way the schedule of readings works, but as of today we have entered the last week of Jesus’ life. We will stay there, in a displaced Holy Week, through October and November. These quarrels with religious leaders are the building blocks of the conspiracy to have Jesus killed, so the stakes couldn’t be higher. And if you notice Jesus being especially hard core over the next few weeks, remember that: he knows these are the last days of his life, and he is “sparring” with the people who are conspiring with the state to have him killed.

So “these things” Jesus is doing are the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the attack on the money-changers in the Temple. Jesus finally arrives in Jerusalem from the sticks up north, rides into the city as a king with a ragamuffin crowd cheering him on, heads downtown to the Temple, and upends all the normal order of how the religious establishment does business. Then before heading back out to the suburbs, he heals the blind and the lame and hangs out with some children. He manages in one day to threaten both the Romans, who are the political rulers of Jerusalem, and the Jewish religious leaders, who are trying to maintain some kind of faithful peace in the city by collaborating with the occupying rulers. When the chief priests and elders, the official keepers of the religious life of the people and the designated compromised peacekeepers, ask Jesus about his authority, it really is Jesus who appears to be the impertinent upstart.

Jesus doesn’t just outwit them with his counter-question. His question is an implied answer. John testified that Jesus was the messiah, so if John’s authority was from God, then they know who Jesus is. Jesus and John are both outside the official channels of authority, and are threats to those within them. They are the proof that God works from the margins and does not compromise with the empire that rules by death. The chief priests have all the appearance of properly constituted authority, they are the ones with all the official power. But if they had to answer their own question honestly — who gave them their authority — they would have to answer “the occupying army of Rome.” You can always tell where your authority comes from by asking who you cannot upset.

In the brief parable that follows, the chief priests are probably the son who looks good and has the right answers, but fails to do what the father asks. While the prostitutes and tax collectors who listened to John and Jesus look like they're doing everything wrong, but end up doing what the father tells them to do. Yes, the little parable with the biting moral is a sick burn, but it also underlines the dispute about authority. Being properly authorized and having the right answers isn't worth much in the kingdom of God. In fact, few of the props that we use to get us through society are worth much compared to hearing the invitation and responding. The chief priests and elders have put their trust in the wrong place, because any place that isn't God is the wrong place.

Jesus comes down to Jerusalem without official sanction, without any authorization that would satisfy those who trust in titles. His authority, like John's, comes directly from God and is itself an indictment of the compromises others have made to get their authority. And what does he do with that authority? He enters as a king but shows no interest in seizing control of the state. He goes into the temple, attacks those he thinks are abusing it, then heals some people and leaves, only to come back the next day to teach. He speaks the truth and confronts the wicked, heals the sick and shows compassion for the poor. In a convulsing, occupied city, Jesus goes about being Jesus.

My friends, in our convulsing country, I know that many of us are frightened and angry. I'm not sure that what I think we can learn from this passage is going to sound like the good news you may want to hear. What is going on around us matters very much, because the well-being of so many people is in question. And, our salvation is not dependent on the state and an election will not save us. Our hope must rest on something deeper and truer than a political party or a government. Jesus enters the city as a king but does not seize control of the state. But neither is he indifferent to how authority and power are used. Rooted firmly in his own calling and the authority given him by God, he is profoundly engaged. He confronts those who use their authority to enrich themselves at the expense of others. In cleansing the temple, he shuts down corruption. And he keeps healing the sick and speaking the truth. He knows what's coming for him and is not daunted by it. Because he lives, as we do too, by a love and hope that are stronger than Rome, stronger than Jerusalem, stronger than death. Amen.