

A Question of Authority
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Question authority. In the 1960s, that became a popular phrase, particularly among young people -- so much so that it was seen on bumper stickers and T-shirts. *Question authority.* And while those who were young people in the 1960s are now collecting Social Security, I don't think that sentiment has completely gone away. In our post-modern world, as it is called by some, truth is often viewed as relative. One could argue that the trickle-down result today can be seen in how we have a very hard time agreeing on what is true, what are the facts, and who has the authority to decide. So, when someone states a fact as true, if we don't like what we hear, we can say something like, "Well, that's just your opinion!" Or more bluntly, "Says who?" In other words, who gave *you* the *authority* to say that? So, we still seem to be in the mode of questioning authority.

Our story today from Matthew 21:23-32 is also a question of authority. Jesus is teaching in the temple courts when the chief priest and elders come and ask him this question: "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?"

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We don't know. Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' "I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

Jesus enters the temple in Jerusalem according to Matthew for the last time, but a lot happens in Matthew's gospel between the parable of the workers in the vineyard that we read last week and today's passage. For example, Jesus predicts his own death a third time, a mother requests that her two sons be granted the privilege of sitting on the right and the left hand of Jesus when he comes into his Kingdom, two blind men receive sight, Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey on what we traditionally celebrate as Palm Sunday, Jesus enters the temple and turns over the

tables of the moneychangers, and then Jesus curses a fig tree because it had no fruit -- which is a very perplexing story. A lot has happened in a short period of time!

As we just read, Jesus has entered the temple courts and was teaching as rabbis often did, when the chief priests and elders come by and hear him asking him, "Who gave you the authority to teach these things?" *Who gave you* the authority to teach these things? By this time, Jesus is used to sparring with the Jewish religious leaders. He sees their traps set for him coming a mile away. He decides to answer their question with a question, adding that if they answer his question, he will answer their question about his authority. I'm reminded of the old story about the rabbi. Someone came to the rabbi one day and asked, "Why is it that rabbis always answer a question with a question?" The rabbi paused and said this, "Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with a question?"

The question Jesus poses is about John's baptism. If you go back and look at the third chapter of Matthew's gospel, it talks about John the Baptist going out into the wilderness of Judea and preaching a message calling people to repent because the Kingdom of heaven is coming near. Not only did the people flock to hear him preach and be baptized by him, but so did the Pharisees and the Sadducees -- the Jewish religious leaders of the day.

In Matthew's gospel, John calls them "a brood of vipers" who need to produce fruit in keeping with repentance, as opposed to claiming that because they are descendants of Abraham, they get "a free pass" and therefore, do not need to repent of anything. The crowds of people respond to this call to repent and to change their way of thinking and living. Even Jesus comes up to be baptized by John, even though John does not think this should be happening and that Jesus should be the one baptizing him, but John does it anyway. But apparently, the Pharisees and the Sadducees don't buy what John is saying about the need to repent and believe.

That is the background for Jesus' question of the chief priests and elders who are questioning his authority when he asks this: "John's baptism -- where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" Matthew pulls back the curtain to let us see behind the scenes and hear the deliberations of the chief priests and elders. It is very couched. They realized that if they say John is from heaven, then Jesus will say, "Why didn't you believe him?" If they say John is of human origin, then Matthew says they are afraid of the people because they believe John was a prophet. So, they play it safe and say, "We don't know."

Now, sometimes "we don't know" or "I don't know" is a perfectly good answer -- especially when we don't know! As a pastor, people sometimes expect me to know everything about everything -- not only Christian, but religious, but I don't know everything about everything. Early on as a pastor, I learned it was okay to say so -- though I can tell from time to time it still surprises people. But in this story, Matthew makes it clear the chief priests and elders *do* know what the answers could be, but they pretend not to know. However, Jesus won't get hooked into their game so he says that he will *not* tell them by what *authority* he is doing these things.

And then, like a good rabbi, Jesus tells a story -- a parable. One person has said parables are like stories, the meaning of which is open enough to interpretation in order to tease the hearer into a deeper and more profound understanding. This parable is about two sons and it seems pretty

simple. The father, who owns a vineyard, asked the first son to go and work in the vineyard. The son said he will not go, but he later changed his mind and goes anyway. The father goes to the other son and says the same thing. He says that he will go, but he does not. Jesus asks the chief priests and elders which one did what his father wanted. They answered “the first” -- meaning the son who *said* he wasn't going to, but *did* it anyway. What really mattered was what they *did* and not what they *said*. Remember earlier in the seventh chapter of Matthew's gospel, it says that the crowds were amazed at Jesus' teaching “because he taught *as one who had authority*, and not as their teachers of the law.” (Matthew 7:28-29, NIV) That's one way to think about authority.

Last Monday evening, our Session experienced another way for us to think about authority. Victoria Melin Robinson, a member of our church family, came before our Session requesting to be endorsed by our Session as an “Inquirer” -- which is the first step in a pretty long process for someone who feels that she is being called to be an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church USA. Victoria met with our Session on our zoom teleconferencing platform. As part of the process, we asked her to share her faith journey that has brought her to this point and also what has led her to believe that she may be called to be an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church. Victoria shared eloquently about her faith journey and growing up in this church. She talked about how Sunday school teachers and youth leaders had not only inspired her, but some have even suggested that she should consider being a pastor. As far as I have been able to research, Victoria is the first person who has grown up in this church, who has sensed a call to ministry and asked for the endorsement of the Session to begin this process.

After Victoria shared what had brought her to this point, I shared with Victoria and the Session, that when it comes to being called, in the Presbyterian Church we think about it in this way. The *first* call is to be a follower of Christ -- it all begins there. The *second* part is that internal, individual calling in which someone thinks or feels God is calling them into the ordained ministry. But it doesn't stop there, at least for us Presbyterians. We believe this is not only an individual, “me-and-God” thing, but something the community of faith should also discern and agree to. So, the community of faith as the church needs to agree that this person not only senses a call from God, but also has some gifts appropriate for the task, and that others also sense that this person is indeed called of God. That's why it is a two-year process to discern this. And at the end of that discernment process begun by our Session, after consulting many times with our presbytery's Committee on the Preparation for Ministry, after three years of seminary, and finally after receiving a call to a church or some other validated ministry, only then is the person ordained. This means that they will be *authorized* to serve as a pastor in a Presbyterian Church USA congregation or ministry.

So when you are ordained, you are in a sense *authorized*. In other words, you are given the *authority* by others to do what you have been called to do. You are given the authority to do a wide range of pastoral duties. For example, as an ordained pastor you are authorized to do things like celebrate the sacraments -- baptism and the Lord's Supper. And you are also authorized by the state to perform weddings. But on a deeper level you are authorized to follow the example of Jesus, teaching as “one who with authority” -- not simply out of your own identity, but from the identity given to you as a follower of Jesus the Christ. Now others may or may not recognize this authority -- that is simply the nature of the call, but the authority is there. So, I encourage us all

to keep Victoria in our prayers in the coming years as she begins this journey of discernment. We are all very proud of her for beginning this journey at this time.

After Jesus tells the parable in our passage today, after his authority and the authority of John the Baptist have been questioned, he says this to the chief priest in elders: “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.” In this story, who is it who recognizes the authority of Jesus? It is those in the crowds, those whom Jesus describes here as tax collectors and prostitutes, who will enter the Kingdom of heaven ahead of the chief priests in the elders? Jesus then explains to the Jewish religious leaders that John the Baptist came to show them the way to righteousness and they did not believe John, but that the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. Apparently, it didn't convince the chief priests in the elders of John's authority and message, or of Jesus' – but it did convince the tax collectors and prostitutes. These tax collectors and prostitutes, who were viewed as being on the lower end of the social and moral ladder of the day, chose to repent and believe.

So, why do they recognize the authority and the truth of the message of John the Baptist? Probably because they knew that they needed saving. The chief priests and the elders seemed to think they had it all together and didn't need forgiveness. They didn't need to believe and repent. Remember that in the Bible, to “repent” meant to change one's mind and how you thought about things, which resulted in a change of direction and following Jesus.

Friends, today I invite you to rely on the authority of Jesus -- not simply because he is a good teacher who says wise things. No, rely on the authority of Jesus because it is the authority given to Jesus by God the Father when Jesus gave his life on the cross, dying for the sins of everyone -- and that includes you and me. That gift of forgiveness and grace becomes authoritative and effective in our lives when we repent and when we believe. When we open ourselves up to God's love and grace and forgiveness, each one of us is then called and authorized to our own ministry. It may not be ordained ministry, as Victoria is being called to. But each of us as a follower of Christ has a calling in life based on our gifts given to us by God's Holy Spirit. Who knows? Someone here may be called someday to be authorized and given the authority to proclaim the good news and serve others as an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church USA. If that is what you are sensing today, reach out to one of the pastors and we will help you begin to discern if that is indeed your calling in life.

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