

## **18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost October 1 2023**

### **Matthew 21:23-32**

Rather than a sermon, per se, I have a few vignettes for us to ponder.

I was amazed to discover this week that I sympathized with the dilemma of the Chief Priests and elders. There they sat, stuck between two equally unsatisfactory decisions.

If they said the baptism of John came from heaven, was ordained by God, then Jesus would ask them why they didn't say so before and support John. But if they denied that it came from heaven they would buck the beliefs of the crowd and would have a riot on their hands. They were afraid of the people's response.

So, they equivocate. "We don't know."

I can sympathize with their dilemma. Maybe even with their solution. Not wanting to be faced with explaining your inaction, but also knowing that if they proclaim something the crowd does not like it will be messy. Maybe they are concerned for who would be hurt by the riot, I think. Or they don't want their phone number and address to be doxed and find angry people at their door. So they don't really answer at all.

But I can also voice the opposite. Do they even believe in anything? Stand for anything? Do I?

Are they just trying to protect their power? Or do they really think they are protecting what God wants?

I can appreciate wanting to avoid the worst parts of taking a stand. Knowing that the response you get may not be good for you- yes- but also not good for the community.

But- time and again in Matthew- faith is tied to what you do. Not what you say. By that measure- the chief priests and elders believe that John's baptism did not come from God. This despite the crowds he drew and their own investigation of his ministry. They just didn't want to say that.

Perhaps it is lack of integrity on their part or truly not wanting to provide the Romans an excuse to kill a bunch of Jews because there was a riot during the festival. But either way, Jesus says, they did not do what God has called them to do.

It's not what you say you're going to do. It's about what you do.

Actions speak louder than words.

What you do reveals what you really believe, trust, look to.

There is the famous quote, "Preach the gospel at all times, when necessary- use words." It's often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, but scholars can find no evidence of that.

A similar quote a friend used to end her emails with was, "Remember, you may be the only Bible some people ever read."

The promise we made at our affirmation of baptism to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ through word and deed.

All these sayings are challenging. I don't know about you, but most of them come with an "ouch" attached. As I automatically think of those times and places I did not act. Where I was not proclaiming the good news of God in Jesus Christ in my deeds. Where the Bible I presented was one of hatred, or neglect, or indifference.

Matthew reminds us that faith is a verb. It is an action word. Faith is not passive acceptance, but rather active adherence. A movement to follow. A movement to care. A movement to comfort. A movement to love.

But, and here is perhaps what is going on with the chief priests and elders, you have to make sure that the faith you live out is actually the gospel. And not what you want.

I've been reading author and theologian Russel Moore's book *Losing Our Religion: and Altar Call for Evangelical America*. Part of his thesis is that Evangelicals have collectively begun to proclaim in their actions something different from the gospel of Jesus Christ. That they have had their view of the Kingdom of God shifted to believe that it is an earthly Kingdom. And that their call is to preserve that. Which leads them to speak and act in ways that do not match what Jesus calls us to.

And in the face of these words of Jesus I turn, as I often do, to the cry of the father of the epileptic boy to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief." I believe, help me when I do not act that way. I believe, correct me when I'm wrong. I believe, forgive my false proclamation.

By what authority are you doing these things. Who gave you this authority.

One commentator I was reading this week asked this question of us public preachers. By what authority do you stand in front of the people of God every Sunday? By what authority do you preach and preside?

My immediate answer is, “Surely not mine!”

When I was installed by Bishop Phil Hougen at Seeds of Faith in Mt. Vernon when they were a mission start, when he was preaching he looked me right in the eyes and said in front of everyone, “You’re not good enough to do this.” I immediately thought, “Don’t give away my secret!” Now, he went on to say none of us is, that we all are in need of the Holy Spirit, each other, and the grace of God.

But what that definitely reminded me was that it was not my authority and expertise that got me there.

By what authority am I up here? In an immediate sense, yours. You all as a community have called me into this position. And you could also send me right back out.

In a broader sense, the church, who moved me through a process of discernment and education that spread over years and involved many people.

Ultimately, God. Who called and equipped me with gifts that the church as a whole and you in particular have said are good for ministry.

By what authority? It’s a good question to ask ourselves. When do we root authority in ourselves and when do we point beyond ourselves? I can fully embody the authority of my office as pastor, but also understand that the

authority does not reside in Brian, but in the office. That I am still answerable to someone else.

I wonder if this is what the Chief priests and elders forgot. That it was God who called for the sons of Aaron to fulfill that duty. That it was a trust given to them, not power that resided in them. And that God could, and often did, do a new thing. Act in a new way. Apart from them and the Temple system.

I wonder if, in some small way, we can do that as well in our own lives. Not as pastor or priest, but just as a mom. A child. A student. A grandparent.

I have talked often about how living in the reign of God means that we are always being oriented to be in relationship with others. But it also means being in relationship with God. Understanding that final authority rests there, beyond us. That even in those things (mom, child, student, grandparent) we look to God's authority for how to be that. To understand that we have been called to those vocations- those relationships- and how those are lived out (at least in the broadest sense) is dictated by God, not us.

It's ironic that the chief priests and elders ask Jesus by what authority he does these things. Because he could truthfully say, my own. As the Son of the Father, whose word goes forth by the breath of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is God. Doing a new thing in the world.

It is so like Jesus, that he doesn't just come out and say that. But rather tries once again to teach. To enlighten. He does not "clap back" or whatever the euphemism is now. He is direct and doesn't hold back, but I think he really wants

them to see that they have taken God's authority and made it their own. And in so doing, lost their authority. Are doing their own thing.

And this is where I am so thankful that the authority isn't mine. That we have a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, because I need it. Because, too often, I talk a good game, but don't live it out. Because I take God's authority and make it my own. Because I don't take a stand for the Truth, even when I know I should because I'm afraid of the consequences right now.

And God in Jesus says to all of us who fall short. Come to me. Come here. Gives us a big hug, gives us a pep talk that reminds us of who he is, who we are- beloved, friends, followers, and feeds us a meal of Christ's own Body and Blood. So that we might go out tomorrow and proclaim the truth of Jesus in our deeds, and use words when necessary. To place ourselves in right relationship to each other and to God. And continue our journey. Following Jesus on the way.