

Matthew 21:23-32

It's in the Doing

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (21:23)

Whether you are conscious of it or not, there is a lot of talk about authority. Who has power? Who can decide? Who has the most authority?

We all submit to authority of some kind or another. There are hierarchies in our lives. As children, parents, teachers and care givers are the authorities in our lives. As adults we see police and the justice system as having the authority to keep order in our communities and society. Elected officials are given the authority to make decisions for us based on the fact they were voted into their positions. Your boss has authority over you, and if you live in apartments or seniors' home you have had to submit to the authority of those who run those places. Just recently the hospital reinstated a masking policy as cases of Covid and other respiratory diseases begin to rise as we head into the fall. The hospital has the authority to do so.

Many times we question authority, as we should. Power likes to be powerful and it needs to be kept in check. There is a balance between power and authority and our own lives that must be maintained in order for us to live together in community. This has always been the case, but as we have seen of late, living well together and particularly in countries like Canada which operates as a democracy, the questions of authority and power are held in a delicate balance that require we see the value in all people and places in order for us to feel safe, heard, and cared for.

It is with these thoughts on authority that we come to the opening of this scripture and the question of “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” What is pertinent here is the timing and the location of this event. If you were to look back in the scripture, Jesus had just the day before triumphantly entered Jerusalem and then headed into the temple and overturned tables of money changers and merchants. This was now the next day. Once again Jesus was in the temple and the authorities, the chief priests and the elders of the people as it were, came to him as Jesus was teaching.

So Jesus has the audacity of going back to the temple the day after he has run roughshod over things much to the chagrin of those who see this temple as their abode, their place of authority. They also know that Jesus has a strong following and they have to be careful how they approach the situation. So they asked Jesus the question about his authority. It is obvious that he has not been given the authority by them to teach or do any of the things he was doing in the temple otherwise he would have been one of them.

Still, Jesus is a teacher, a rabbi, well versed in the practices of the Jewish people and so as a good rabbi is apt to do, he answers their question with another question. The trap they have set for him, to trip him up and give them reason to throw him out or worse, well now they find themselves in a catch because no matter how they answer it is not going to lead to a satisfactory outcome for them.

They can't answer Jesus' question, at least without having to admit something they don't want to admit, so he doesn't answer their question. However, that does not leave us off the hook.

A while back we heard the question from Jesus as he was with his disciples where he asked, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15) This is a central question for the Gospel of Matthew and one that we are required to think about. The question posed by Jesus to these authorities is basically asking them, "Who do you say that I am?"

It is also relevant to the very short parable that followed. The story of the two sons is straightforward and has an easy answer. The Pharisees and elders of the people have no difficulty with this question of which son did the will of the father. Of course, it was the one who though saying "no" first, on second thought went out to the vineyard. The one who said "yes", and didn't get up from the television didn't make any difference in his father's day.

Now I could go on and make more comparisons about this story and the authorities, but I would rather take a look at our own response to Jesus' parable and relate that to our lives.

For starters, do we see Jesus as an authority in our lives? Do his words and life have an impact on us? You see Jesus had an impact on those who were seen as the bottom of the rung in society, but he only made angry those who had authority. Those whose structures and influence would be shaken or transformed if Jesus was truly the Messiah. But it may be that we are more like the Pharisees and rulers than we like to think. We like to come on Sunday mornings to sit and hear about Jesus, but how much harder it is for us to walk out these doors and actually live the life of a Christian. It is also hard on us when people come into this space and for goodness' sake want to change anything. We certainly like status quo. It is more manageable, less threatening.

However, Jesus was a destabilizing figure in his time and really should be in our time. To be a Christian means to be a follower of Christ. In fact, many people are leaving behind the term "Christian" because it has come to mean power, authority, status quo. But to be a follower of Christ means to follow Jesus, to embody, to live out daily what Jesus did. In Matthew chapter 4:18-22 Jesus calls the first disciples and his words were not "believe me", but "follow me."

To follow meant times of teaching and learning, but it was also in their doing that they followed Jesus as they went out into the countryside with Jesus and particularly in their ministry following the resurrection of Christ. Jesus spent his time with the least likely

and most helpless. He was accused of dining with sinners and tax collectors. Yet, if we are followers of Christ then we too will find ourselves not only at the dinner table with those one might consider respectable, but also, and maybe more so, in the places and with the people that are the least favored in our society.

So often our churches become our temples and we don't like any one playing around with that. Don't change the music, or the way we say the Lord's prayer. Let's not mess with the décor or make things more functional. We spent time protecting the building rather than spending our time here and seeing it as part of our work. The worship service is the work of the people done in preparation for what we are called to with others throughout the week. It does not mean that our building is not important, but is it important only to the extent that it allows us to be strengthened for our journey with Christ and how the building is used to serve others, not just ourselves.

Followers of Christ, are we prepared to go and do the work that is asked of us, even if at first we are reluctant? Or are we more apt to sit here and agree with all that is being said, only to walk out these doors and sit back in front of the television, so to speak?

This time of worship, this sermon, any sermon, is only as good as it moves us to become followers of Christ who embody, who live out our lives as people who are transformed by Christ, who live in grace and offer that grace to others. Christian faith is active. It is a faith in motion. Yes, time for stillness is important to the extent that it gives us time to be with God, to be renewed, and restored. Yet, we cannot stay still. We answer the question of "Who do people say Jesus is?" as we go out like Jesus and minister to people's needs. As followers of Christ, we can do no less.

We do it with the authority of Jesus who gave himself to death so that we might know life, full and abundant life, in the power of the Holy Spirit, steeped in the love and grace of God. Amen.