

King of Glory Lutheran – September 30, October 1, 2017
Year A: Pentecost 18 Matthew 21: 23-32, Phil 2:5-8
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Asking questions, and challenging authority can be helpful, as long as we know our final authority as Christians, is Christ who grants us grace.

It's finally here! October 2017 has arrived, the month in which we will commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It will conclude on October 29th, when we'll sing the ancient Lutheran hymns and a few new ones. We'll watch a movie about Luther and we'll confirm students into the life of faith we share.

We are in these seats today, because Martin Luther asked questions. As it says on your bulletin insert this morning, Luther was a smart guy. He had an education and as professors are known to do, they encourage students to ask questions. Luther began asking questions. He began to ask questions of the Church. "Do indulgences really buy people out of purgatory?" "Why do we have Scripture only written in Latin, only read by the priests? Why can't we have a Bible in German so all the people can read it?"

Luther's questions challenged the Pope and the direct authority of the church. Those in leadership didn't especially appreciate it and what ensued began a domino effect upon the church and much of Europe. But without Luther's challenge, we wouldn't be sitting here.

To Jesus the church authorities said no less. "By what authority do you do these things?!" they inquired. "Where do you get the authority to heal the blind and the lame? How do you do it? Who are you?"

Good questions - by the leaders of the church no less. These were people who by our standards could have been the council, the altar guild, the outreach team. Good people – trying to protect the system they knew and cared about.

When a person or people begin to move sideways in a system that usually moves straight ahead; fault lines, like those made by earthquakes, open up. Fault lines begin to form that if jostled from below with tremors, get larger. They open up to make cracks.

Jesus answered their questions with questions. “Well, I’ll tell you if you tell me... about John’s baptism.” Jesus wanted to see what they’d say. Would they tell him they accepted John’s baptism, or rejected it? That would tell Jesus about their hearts.

Challenging questions often reveal people’s hearts, their motives, and their fault lines.

The chief priests and elders knew their answer could have political and religious ramifications. Jesus authority was growing among the people as they watched him heal and teach in the temple. His actions demonstrated God’s power. The crowd around this rabbi was increasing. Yet, if they acknowledged John’s baptism was from heaven, Jesus could turn on them by asking, “Why didn’t you follow him then?” They were caught no matter which way they answered. So they muttered under their breath, “We don’t know.”

It’s been week of questions, authorities challenging authority and more division in our nation. “Why can’t I take a knee?” “How can you take a knee?” “By what authority can you say that?” From Puerto Rico, we hear cries of “Where is our help?” “Can a member of the cabinet take a private jet? Does he have that authority when they were authorized trips?”

Whew! Asking questions and challenging authority sure can get people riled up! Do you see the fault lines? They’re opening. Lest we think we’re above it, how often have we thought, “How can she say that?” “I’d never do that!” We judge so that we can feel better about ourselves, without knowing all the facts.

So this man had two sons. He asked both to go into the vineyard and work. One said he would not and then did. One son said he would and he didn’t. Any of you parents that have asked your children to clean up their rooms, set the table, or take out the trash I bet can identify with this father. You know which of your kids will do what they promise and which will need, well, a bit more prompting, let’s say.

But the bottom line of Jesus’ story is that one son went and one didn’t. The words on the page of scripture tell us only that. We don’t know what else happened. We don’t know if the father had other conversation with the sons. Did the sons talk to each other? What motivated one to go and one to stay behind? Was it too hot? Did one have the flu? We don’t know.

Nor do we know what motivates any of us. We don't know what truly motivates any of us to challenge authority or ask questions or do what we do.

The text tells us specifically what was behind the answer the chief priests and elders gave. They feared the crowd. They feared Jesus' rebuke. The text doesn't tell us about the brothers' reasons. We don't know.

What we do know is how Jesus praised the tax collectors and the prostitutes who believed in Him. By naming these two categories of people, Jesus is explicitly stating they are more righteous than the church leaders. That was Jesus' challenge to His local authority.

Yet, Jesus knew from where he came. As St. Paul writes in Philippians, 'though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on a cross.' (Phil 2:6,8)

St. Paul is urging the community to humility and unity following Jesus' example. 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.' (Phil 2:3,5) Paul wrote in contrast to the honor seeking behaviors of the Roman aristocrats. Don't move upward, move downward!

Paul wanted the Philippian church to be shining lights in the world so they might demonstrate to others unity, humility and a public witness. The grandiose behavior of attracting attention to yourself puts the unity of the community at risk. Thinking lowly or with humility, seeing one another as equal in the eyes of God, brings the community together.

Christ knew where His authority came from even if He didn't want to tell the church elders. He knew it came from God the Father alone. He understood that all were sinners in God's eyes in need of grace. The gift of salvation that His life could bring was for all people: the church elders, the priests, the tax collectors and yes, even the prostitutes.

This then, for we Christians, is our highest authority. Christ's humility, death and resurrection is the place where we stand whenever we question, agree or defy. It is only from this spot, with humility that we are called to take a stand like Luther did. As Christians, called to be a shining light of unity and public witness, it isn't our aim to create fault lines, but slow them or stop them.

There were two sons. But there was one that changed his mind. We don't know why. But he did.

We can change our minds too. If there is space in the story where we don't know the answer, there is space in the story for change to happen. God happens to be in the change business you know. The son went to work. He humbled himself perhaps. He had a change of heart, perhaps. God is always ready for people to change – eager in fact for us to do so.

A republican and a democrat on the hill sit down and begin to talk. They love to argue and challenge. But today the risks are too high. So they begin to talk. Really talk and really listen to each other. Humility wins the day as they consider what might be best for their constituents. Politician.

A man on his death bed, realizes that life will soon be no more. In the face of that fact, his heart begins to open up. He admits his failures and fear of ultimate judgement. He did some real deals under the table; life had always been easy. But he knew it wasn't right. God races to the bedside, rejoicing in the man's humility and as he crosses from death to life, welcomes another sinner home. Tax Collector.

A wife struggles to make amends. "He always has to be right. Whether it's about fixing the car or his opinion about a meal on the menu, he always has to be right. Well, this time I am. I know it. But if I tell him that, then I'm no better than he. Lord, help me be humble." Wife.

A church member comes to the altar again on Sunday. Standing next to the politician, the tax collector, the wife and all one hundred of her other closest friends, she thinks to herself. "Lord, I'm no better than any of these. I'd like to judge them. But I don't really understand them. I don't know their hearts like you do. Open my heart to change it, for I accept your authority alone. It is your opinion, Christ, that matters most." A tear of joy rolled down her cheek – in God's eyes, it was no less important than Martin Luther's first question.

Amen