

King of Glory Lutheran Church

September 26/27, 2020

Year A: 17<sup>th</sup> Weekend after Pentecost: Matthew 21:23-32

Rev. Debra Abbott

**Matthew 21:23-32**

*23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" 24 Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." 27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.*

*28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.*

I don't like being told what to do. Even when it's something I know I should do. My doctor tells me to get more exercise. My accountant tells me to put more money in savings. My counselor tells me to practice forgiveness.

When someone in a position of authority tells me what to do, my first instinct is to ignore them. If it's not my idea, why should I listen to someone else telling me what to do? And how do I know that the person telling me what to do is right?

The question of who has authority, of who we should listen to and follow, is a question we are faced with every single day. Whether it is a decision about our health, or a product we purchase, or an issue in our community.

Well today in our gospel reading we have a dramatic scene unfolding in front of us. At the beginning of chapter 21 Jesus entered Jerusalem and was welcomed like a king. "Hosanna to the Son of David!" the people cried.

Next he drove out the money changers in the Temple. This shut down the system of animal sacrifice. People coming to the Temple had to change their money from the Roman currency to Temple currency in order to buy the animals for sacrifice. No money changers, no sacrifices. Jesus turned the Temple economy upside down.

And now today in our gospel reading Jesus is face to face with the chief priests and the elders in the Temple. They don't like Jesus' actions or the change he demands. They ask him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

That's what they say, but here is what they might have been thinking. Who are you Jesus to waltz into Jerusalem and now the Temple like you own the place? Why should we listen to you? Who are you to tell us what to do?

And in return Jesus asks them a question about John the Baptist and his authority to baptize. It's a question they do not want to answer because they don't want to give John legitimacy but they also don't want to upset the people John is popular with. So they say, "We do not know."

So Jesus tells them a story.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?"

And this question, the chief priests and the elders will answer. They are confident. They know that actions matter to people and to God. It's not what the two sons say that counts, it's what they do. So they answer, "The first."

The chief priests and the elders feel pretty good about this question and answer, that is, until Jesus responds.

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

The two sons in Jesus' story are both children of the father, the vineyard owner. One son gives the wrong answer but then goes and does what the father asks. The other gives the right answer but fails to follow through and work in the vineyard, doing the father's work.

The chief priests and the elders get it. Stories about fathers and sons are the story of God and God's people throughout scripture and throughout time.

But now the original question about Jesus' authority has become a personal question for the chief priests and the elders. The people who think they have God's authority are now face to face with Jesus. Are they truly doing God's work? Are they a part of God's kingdom?

Jesus is confronting them about their economic, religious and political system. Not an easy conversation for anyone to have. But at the very heart of this confrontation is something even more important. Jesus is forcing them to rethink what God is asking of them. Who is God? How do we live as God's people?

The story Jesus tells is a hard story to hear for the people who think they are in, that they know God, speak for God, and are in charge of God's kingdom. Turns out that they are not first in line as they had assumed. Jesus doesn't say they are out of the kingdom, just that they are not at the front of the line. They've got some things to learn.

Now imagine the people who heard this story who weren't in charge of the Temple. This story is good news for the people in Jesus' time who were told they were outsiders in God's kingdom, outside of God's family and God's love. Jesus says the tax collectors and prostitutes are at the front of the line.

What about us? What if Jesus joined our worship service today? What if he told this story to us? Because that's what he's doing.

Where do you find yourself in this story? Are you the son that says no but then goes out to the field to work? Or are you the son that says yes but then doesn't follow through?

As a pastor, as a "religious authority," I always get pretty nervous when the chief priests and elders get busted for focusing on their job and their power and their own agenda rather than God's. It hits me close to home.

How many hours and days do I spend preaching the gospel of God's love and forgiveness for all people, and then fail to love and forgive and serve my own neighbors?

The chief priests and elders today remind us what we already know. People in power don't want to give up power. People with wealth don't want to give up wealth. People with a good seat at the table don't want to give up their place.

And yet Jesus says, there is still hope. There is room in God's kingdom for all of us. The talkers and the doers, the insiders and the outsiders, the people who think they've got it all figured out and the people who know they don't.

But we better get ready to have our tables turned, to have challenging conversations, and to give up whatever power we think we've earned.

Like everyone who first heard Jesus' story today, you and I are left asking ourselves who is the authority in our life? Who do we follow? And how will we act?

Jesus illustrates for us today that actions are important. That God wants us to respond to God's love with our whole life – every day, with every decision, with every word, with every action.

That means following Jesus and making him the authority in your life. He is the one we are called to listen to and follow and serve.

Maybe you think you know what that means but do you really?

In a world governed by power and wealth and by violence and fear Jesus says that God's authority calls us to humility, to generosity, to compassion, to justice, to peace and to love.

Jesus will be the first to tell you that this way of living is not easy, in fact it is dangerous. It will bring you into conflict with the smaller authorities in this world. Maybe not with your doctor or counselor who help you stay physically and mentally healthy, but quite possibly with your family, friends and neighbors.

There are all kinds of people and influencers who claim authority over us every day. And so on this day, Jesus asks us to remember who we follow and who we serve. We follow God's love, God's ways, and are living into God's kingdom. Where the least are the first, where sinners are forgiven, where all are welcome, and where love wins.

Amen.