

“Says Who?”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Matthew 21:23-32

²³When 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?” ²⁴Jesus 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. ²⁵Did 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?’ ²⁶But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” ²⁷So 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.’ ²⁹He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹Which 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. ³²For 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 earth is round.”

A non-controversial statement to most of us, but for some flat-earthers out there, the response might be, “No, it’s not.” Or the question, “Says who?”

Rather than debate the original proposition, an attempt is made to undermine the authority backing up the assertion.

Frankly, this can be a kind of cheap rhetorical gimmick, a way of blowing smoke to obscure what’s happening.

And in a way, that’s what the religious authorities are doing in today’s lesson. Rather than ask Jesus about his teachings and what motivates him, they seek to undermine him with questions of authority. They’re trying to change the topic from calls to repentance and the meaning of Jesus’s ministry.

But upon reflection, this wasn’t such a surprising thing for them to do, not because they didn’t want to engage Jesus but because he was a threat to their position.

Remember, this passage comes from late in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus had just entered Jerusalem for the last time. As he made his way into the Holy City, he was hailed as the "Son of David"—while riding a colt, a visible challenge to both political and religious authorities. Once in the Temple precinct, he overturned the tables of the money changers, disrupting the business that undergirded the sacrificial system. And in doing all this, Jesus was opposing all that the chief priests and scribes represented, a system rooted in the Torah, one that had been in operation from time immemorial.

So, the question about where Jesus' authority came from isn't unreasonable. But it still begs the larger question of where *anybody*'s authority came from. Jesus could have said, "Scripture" or "my father" and his words would have fallen on deaf ears. Instead, he took a different tack and posed a question of his own. Some might think Jesus was engaged in verbal gymnastics or stereotypical rabbi behavior, answering a question with a question, but he's not. His question in response, about the source of John's authority—was it divine or from humans?—was directly related to the query of the priests and scribes.

Remember that it was John who baptized Jesus. It was the latter who affirmed the status of the former by coming to him, and who afterwards was affirmed by the Holy Spirit and the voice of God. If the priests acknowledged that John was acting at the behest of God, they would implicitly be recognizing that Jesus did, too. But if they said John's authority came from humans, then they might stir up an insurrection. While we don't know the depth of popular support for John, we do know that he had standing with the people and that he had been martyred by Herod. This was a no-win situation for the religious establishment.

Mind you, they only made matters worse for themselves by answering Jesus' question with an evasive "We don't know."

Really?

The chief priests and scribes, the learned holy men at the pinnacle of Judaism, the ones charged with interpreting Scripture and enforcing religious law—they didn't know?

Really?

This was the equivalent of intentionally sailing the Titanic into the iceberg.

What happens next does not impress us with the chief priests and scribes, either.

For Jesus immediately launched into telling an unusually short and clear parable. There was no mistaking what was going on. A father calls his two sons to work in the fields; the first says "no thank you" but ultimately shows up to help out; the latter volunteers but is never to be seen. When asked who the more faithful son was, the priests and scribes answered the first; clearly they knew "We don't know" wouldn't suffice. Jesus revealed that the members of the religious establishment answered correctly.

And then, for good measure, he said that tax collectors and prostitutes, who were seen as the dregs of society, would gain entry into heaven before these grand, learned, and observant men. Those who, even though they might sin, tried to repent were of more interest to God than those who crossed the t's and dotted the i's, followed all the forms, but didn't actually mean or even think about what they did.

Actions mattered to Jesus. They mattered to God.

And no, this isn't a claim for works-righteousness but a question of whether we allow our faith to shape our lives and actions or merely follow it when we find it to be convenient.

If we truly conform our lives to Scripture, we remember that it was God, and not some political platform or ideological commitment, who inspired Amos to proclaim, “[L]et justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (*Amos 5:24*) Or Micah to preach, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (*Micah 6:8*)

God didn't want empty ritual but lives of mercy. God has always wanted that, whether in the 8th century B.C., or the time of Jesus, or the present day.

Jesus knew that God was the source of all authority and that the authority wielded by men and women on this earth is ultimately rooted—or not—in what God would have us do. And so a clear sign of legitimacy was the living of a Godly life.

“Says who?” you might ask.

Well, who do you say is the source of authority? A Twitter feed? A louder mouth? A bullying spirit?

No, thank you. I'll stick with mercy, kindness, and a loving God.

The nature of authority—who has it, what its sources might be, its legitimacy—has long been contested, in both the realm of ideas and the world in which people actually live. Jesus and the religious establishment were not debating abstract points but the application of the one set of Scripture they held in common.

The difference was that the priests and scribes saw the Torah as being effectively about them and what they knew. This was the way it had always been done, and this was how it should stay.

Jesus saw matters differently. He was immersed in the Hebrew Bible, he clearly knew it, he often quoted it when preaching, and he saw it as the living word of God, not a dead letter. Yes, he proposed a radical reinterpretation of the law, but he did so out of fidelity to what it said and what it meant. In Matthew 5 Jesus said he had come not to overturn the law but to fulfill it. God was doing a new thing, extending the covenant to all of his

children. That generosity of vision was upsetting to some people. It still is. But when we try to narrow this vision, when we try to replace the imperatives of Scripture with our own political preferences, we are denying God's authority.

The truth is that it is hard to be both an American and a Christian. We trace our political roots to an act of defying authority, to a claim of power for the people, to an assertion that we, and not some distant ruler, knew what was best.

As Christians, we are called to submit to the authority of God, to place God at the center of our lives and our actions.

So, what are we to do? We live in a democracy, one that might have its faults but still one where we, Christians included, have a responsibility to be involved. One of the things we can do is to pray and think about the nature of authority, about how we might be called to exercise our power of the vote today.

As I've said before, the Bible tells us nothing about marginal tax rates, so-called Modern Monetary Theory, or the wisdom of the welfare state. It has nothing to say about Sino-American relations, or about trade wars. Zip. Nada.

But think of what it does say about the way Israel and Judah were to treat the stranger with mercy, how the prophets arose to challenge wayward kings, how the supposed power of Caesar was contrasted with the everlasting glory of Christ, and we can see guideposts, divine hints. Service, not self-indulgence, is the order of the day. We need to keep this in mind, to remember that legitimate authority acts from a place of justice, not jingoism; from a place of charity, not anger; from following a path of righteousness, not wrongdoing.

We can look at Jesus and how he saw his authority as something from God, something to be used wisely. He was the true servant-leader, unlike so many who throughout the ages have wielded power driven by avarice or ego.

Jesus' authority is such that using human standards, it was still affirmed time and again, through its dedication to doing the work of God, not pursuing power over others.

In response to the question "Where does your authority come from?" Jesus didn't offer a glib answer. Instead, he did what he always did: he taught, he acted, he showed. Sometimes, we can be like the religious figures, trying to evade the issue before us or providing an evasive answer when we face a moment of decision. That is when we should take encouragement from the parable.

In his telling, Jesus did not offer one truly good figure and one who was wholly evil. Instead, we can see ourselves in the two sons. Neither is perfect, not by a long shot. But God works with who we are. That doesn't mean we should be satisfied with doing second-best. That's clear from the example of the first son, the young man who spurned

his father but ultimately came around. He knew that it wasn't too late to do what is right. And what was true for him is true for us, too.

All too often, people look to Scripture to justify doing the wrong thing, intentionally twisting what it says, when telling a white lie, fudging taxes, or denying people their rights. People know doing these things is wrong—that's why people seek refuge in someone else's supposedly saying that a sin is actually okay.

We don't know why the first son didn't go out to work, but clearly he knew he was in the wrong. We don't know if he assuaged his guilt at first by turning to a spurious authority, one that would give license to his turning his back on his father. But clearly the young man changed his mind, recognizing his father as a true authority figure or, maybe, remembering the call of Scripture to honor one's father and mother.

Looking at this story and looking at Jesus and the religious authorities, we are reminded that authority comes in all sorts of guises, that some authority is earned and some is not. In this case, the choice we face as Americans and Christians is to look at authority and see if it is legitimate, and if it is justified.

We can ask where it comes from and why it should be followed, and if someone gives us an answer that doesn't comport with Scripture, then we can remember that the answer to the question "Says who?" ought to be God and not ourselves.