



**Sermons from St. Marks
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The Authority Problem

Text: Matthew 21:23-32

Rev. Dr. John E. Manzo

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Most people who have gone to church and listened to the stories in the Bible know a couple of things about Jesus. Most people know that he had a major problem with the chief priests and the elders. The thing that people don't always know about was exactly what the problem was. The problem was the authority problem. The leaders of Judaism were concerned. Jesus was in their midst and was very popular and they could not determine where he got his authority to be speaking about God from.

So they asked him where he got his authority from. Jesus turned the tables and asked where John the Baptist had gotten his authority from. As Matthew tells us, if he said from God then why didn't they follow John; if they said from no one than they would enrage people. They had the same problem with Jesus. If his authority was from God; they weren't part of his followers. And if he didn't have authority from anyone other than himself, they would become fodder for the crowds.

This was, however, a serious issue. These people saw themselves as the guardians of Judaism. The history of the Jewish people was a history of enslavement, of being nomads, and being occupied, most often by pagans. These people took their role as guardians of the faith very seriously; they believed that the integrity of God and all that they believed about God was at stake.

Jesus, like John, offered a unique problem. Jesus wasn't a movement; he was a person who many people embraced. He did amazing things and he said amazing things, often contrary to what the Jewish leaders of the era believed. He was challenging their very authority.

Societies and religions do not like to have their authority challenged.

We often take for granted how the United States came to be. We celebrate the Declaration of Independence as the wonderful document it is. It was, however, a document that challenged authority. Once, when visiting Canada, I saw a monument dedicated to the Tories, those people who remained loyal to the English Crown during the Colonial Insurrection in the 18th century. It was a monument to the people who liked King George better than George Washington; and it was a reminder that our nation exists on the very notion of challenging authority.

We like to challenge authority when we are not in charge; but when we are in charge, the story changes.

And so there is this little exchange between the chief priests, the elders, and Jesus. By whose authority????

Jesus, of course, leaves them standing, unable to deal with him.

But then Jesus does something we see the Jesus of the Bible do all the time; the Jesus we don't see in the movies or hear about as much in church as we ought to. Jesus becomes very confrontational and he isn't particularly nice about it.

His short parable about a man with two sons, one who promises the world and delivers nothing; and one who promises nothing and delivers everything, is a direct affront to the chief priests and the elders. THEY were the ones of great promise who offered nothing; his followers were the outcasts, who came through for God.

And then he says the unthinkable:

“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you.”

Jesus had told the religious authorities, the very guardians of Judaism, that they were lower than the most despicable of sinners.

There are some points that this narrative does teach us.

The first is that the only real authority is God's authority. God doesn't really demonstrate any need or use of our opinion or any concept of authority. God always move to have a partnership with people, but God does not long for our opinions. When you deal with God, you deal with God on God's terms, not our's.

I once had a New Testament professor who was probably the best professor I ever had, but he was not blessed with great personal interaction skills. I took a course from him which was an introduction to the New Testament. It was a great course and I was only one of six students in the class. The course was an elective and he had a difficult reputation.

During our first class, one of my classmates asked the professor if there was going to be any class discussion. My classmate was met with a cold stare and the professor asked him, “Why on earth would I be interested in your opinions on anything?” My classmate, to his credit, couldn't think of anything and none of us wanted to take up the debate, so we didn't have any class discussions.

But I was struck. This professor was brilliant and I learned more about the Bible in one

semester from him than any other professor I would ever have. I am glad we didn't have class discussion. We all would have learned much less.

It reminds me, in so many ways, of what we read and learn today. We have an exchange between the Messiah and the priests and the elders. What they miss is that their authority is self-given; their authority is strictly human. Jesus' authority comes from himself and he has no need, whatsoever, for their approval of their insights.

One thing we learn and often need to learn about God is that it is up to us to learn and understand God; not visa versa.

A second point is this. The fact that the majority of people believes something doesn't make it right.

Four hundred years before Jesus, the Greek philosopher, Socrates, found himself to be in trouble. He was, by his own admission, a gadfly to society and he questioned everything, most of all the authority of those in authority.

Needless to say, many people found Socrates to be incredibly irritating. So they voted, a very democratic thing to do, that unless Socrates recanted his statements and promised to 'play nice,' he would be put to death. They voted and this passed.

Socrates response to the election were not what they expected. Socrates lecture them that the majority of people were fully capable of being wrong. Popularity did not mean something was true or right.

Socrates was forced to drink poison. They didn't like his answer of accept his insight.

But his point was valid.

One blessing we have in the United States is that the majority of people make decisions and we choose to live with those decisions. Even in our church, we do the same thing. We have an issue, we discuss it, we vote, and we live with the outcome.

The thing is, this doesn't mean that the majority is always right. The fact that someone or something is popular simply means that person is popular. It doesn't make them right. The fact that a person or a position is unpopular doesn't make it wrong; it is simply unpopular.

Here is something we know about Jesus. He spoke to a lot of people and the fact of the matter is that the vast majority of people he spoke to did not believe in him. When he was crucified the crowd turned on him. There was no backlash against Pilate or the Romans. Jesus was put to death and was mostly unpopular. The priests and the elders had their way; but it didn't mean that they were right.

Which brings me back to the beginning.

Jesus' confrontation with the leaders of the Temple was about authority. They believed he had none because, to them, the only people who had authority were the people they anointed. Jesus, for his part, had no respect for the authority they claimed to have.

The problem was that they were no longer seeking God; they presumed they knew everything there was to know about God.

The problem wasn't that they were not learned; they were. The problem was that they were no longer looking to learn truth; they knew it.

The problem was that they did not view faith as a journey, but as a destination, and they had arrived already.

We do learn several things from this.

There is no wisdom other than God.

There is no such *thing* as truth, the only real Truth is Christ.

In the end, ultimately, there is no real authority except God. The leaders of the Temple missed that. Let us not.