

Proper 21A - September 28, 2014
Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32
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This gospel passage is found in the context of Jesus engaging in a final challenge to the religious authorities as he enters the Jerusalem Temple for the last time. This challenge takes the form of a series of confrontations in which the authorities attempt to trap him, but instead are themselves confounded or bested by him in public debate. The scene today begins with Jesus' authority being challenged. The religious authorities ask him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"ⁱ Like a good rabbi Jesus responds to their question with a question, "I will also ask you one question" he says, "If you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" By mentioning John the Baptist, Jesus invokes the authority of the prophets throughout Israel's history, the authentic bearers of God's word, although most were rejected and killed. Anchoring his authority in his baptism by John, Jesus sees John and himself in that succession of prophets, and sets his God-given authority over against these religious leaders he's contending with.

And how did the authorities respond? Well, rather than acknowledge that John's mission was from God and thus that Jesus was from God as well—or rather than claim John's authority was only human and thus put themselves at odds with popular opinion about John—the religious authorities instead decide it is better not to answer at all. "We do not know," they respond expediently. Remember, their initial question about Jesus' authority was *not* for information, but rather to entrap him. But they fell into their own trap! Their refusal to answer allows Jesus to respond in kind, and to make their duplicity clear to all. And duplicity it was—double-dealing, deceitful, deceptive—claiming certainty of belief, yet relying on the popular opinions of their day. And so in their dishonest caution they respond, "We do not know."ⁱⁱ Jesus points this out powerfully as a form of duplicitous "double speak."

It's important to note that those religious leaders who went out to hear John preach in the wilderness, in fact, did *not* accept John's message, and did not repent of their exclusionary and self-righteous certitude. Whereas, those—for example, the tax collectors and prostitutes (who eventually gathered as followers of Jesus)—who earlier had been saying no to God's will as revealed in the Torah, in fact, changed their minds and hearts and behaviors and accepted John's (and then Jesus') message.

So, today we hear the first of three of Jesus' parables which follow immediately from this confrontation over authority. This first parable about a man and his two sons starts with the question "What do you think?" and illustrates the theme that God requires deeds rather than empty words. Deeds not words. The two sons are judged by their actions, not by what they promised. What we actually *do* is more important than what *we say we will do*. We church folk sometimes get so consumed by talking and writing, and going to committee meetings and stating the correct position and getting it all into the "right words." This is especially true when churches gather for their annual denominational

conventions—sort of an annual “word checkup.” But, what if we had something like an annual *deed* checkup, where the main topic would be “What have you been *doing*?” and “What is your plan for *action*?” Deeds more than creeds. Or ask it this way, “If Christianity were a criminal activity, would there be enough evidence to indict you, and your church? Could you be convicted?”

Jesus himself, of course, didn’t just teach and argue to illustrate the way of openness, humility and generosity of spirit; but in his very being, acting and dying he revealed himself as that very way, as Paul so beautifully describes in the passage from Philippians. Jesus did not claim to have any exclusive or self-promoting or coercive authority. Nor did he base his authority on some expertise, or on some religious or human lineage, privilege or election—or even his divine nature. And he refused to let his disciples claim any exclusive authority as well. The authority of Jesus was based fundamentally in his self-giving humanity – his willingness to forego the divine prerogatives at his disposal and to focus instead on God’s truth, beauty and goodness which are at the center of all human hearts who seek God, and on God’s mission of repairing the world.

So *deeds are more important than creeds*. Yes, but it’s also important as we each continue to grow into the full stature of Christ that our thoughts, words and deeds *match up*—and why?—because thoughts matter, and words matter and even tone of voice matters, because we need both right attitude and right action in right relationship to be complete, to be whole and to live faithfully in this world. As Jesus’ deeds matched his words, therein lay his authority and power. I’m always struck by certain individuals and communities who have nurtured particular attitudes and then speak and act on them congruently and repeatedly. We’ve all known people, for example, whose spirit and demeanor and the whole way they carry themselves seems so coherent and in sync with their active lives and in their interactions with others. And we have also known people whose beliefs and actions, words and deeds, demeanor and the way they interact with others, seems so very incongruous or incoherent: for example, the pro-lifer who murders a doctor at a Planned Parenthood clinic; or the self-righteous and shrill voice of the peace advocate at an anti-war rally; or the avowed follower of Christ who either ignores or blames the victims of hunger, fear, injustice and oppression. ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus wants to take us to a place of congruity and coherence, to a cultivation of attitudes and qualities of the heart and mind that make seamless the words we speak and the deeds we do. 20th Century philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote about the deceitful and deceptive abuses of power when words and deeds are dislocated: she stated, “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”^{iv} So for us, Jesus wants us both to say, “Yes,” when he tells us to “Love one another,” *and* for us to *actually* love one another! Jesus wants us to say, “Yes,” when he says, “Follow me,” *and* he really wants for us to *actually* follow him!

Of course, we Christians are also used to “doing Church” and “doing mission” and “doing good”—*and* living our lives as we see fit.^v Often we act as recipients, thankful but passive. But the wise reply of Jesus in today’s gospel reminds us that any authority we claim and

use also has demands on us. This is not so obvious, but it is true. We may not be comfortable with it, but we are called not just to act and be as we think we should, but to be and do what *God* needs and desires us to be and do. We are more used to deciding ourselves how we will live, how much we will “give” to the church, how much we will help others. We often fit these things into *our* perceived needs and prerogatives and schedules as we have the time. But if we say God is our authority, then we must admit God can have demands on us, and a mission and a purpose for us. The demand on Jesus himself was to empty himself of all the divine prerogatives of his “authority” that he had at his disposal—especially for self-gain, or even self-preservation—but to go all the way, give all of himself even if that led to a cross. In our readings today we hear a call to embrace the authority that not only loves us, saves us, strengthens us, comforts us, but also makes a loving demand on us to connect thought, word and deed, and to live in full trust and joyful obedience. And we are called to do this not once or twice, but over our whole life. As W. E. B. Du Bois put it, “The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.”^{vi}

ⁱ Their questioning is not just a matter of personal irritation nor just a reaction to his actions in the temple – for example, his turning of the tables; for the further context for this text in Matthew’s gospel points to the dispute in the fractured and scattered religious community in the aftermath of the war and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple that occurred in 70 AD – some forty years after this scene of Jesus in the Temple. The debate concerns who are the authoritative teachers for the reconstitution of the people of God. This is a family fight of Matthew’s Jewish and Gentile community of followers of Jesus with the Judaism from which they came. It is staged retroactively throughout his gospel, back to the time of Jesus forty years earlier, thus adding in both an edge to the confrontations of Jesus himself with the religious authorities, and adding assertions of Jesus’ authority. So for example, earlier in the gospel Jesus is recognized by the crowds as teaching with authority (7:29); he is said to have authority to heal as recognized even by Gentiles (8:9). He is then said to have authority to forgive sins, and confers that authority on his disciples (9:8; 10:1). And by the end of the Gospel (28:18-20), Jesus is said to declare that God had given him all authority.

ⁱⁱ Yet, instead of truly not knowing—which would be perfectly okay—these leaders equivocate and obfuscate out of their preconceived certainties and fear of the crowd. Of course the answer “We do not know” *can* be a legitimate response. Not only seekers, but believers, and even teachers of theology, have no vocation or commission to know all the answers. Our vocation is to the truth not to certainty. “We do not know” can be a very authentic confession of faith. As Jesus did with Thomas by acknowledging his doubt yet calling him to believe, so Jesus calls all of us to seek, ask, and knock, to search and struggle for truth, and finally, take a stand, even if in some sense, we still do not know for sure. But the very opposite happens here.

ⁱⁱⁱ ...or the cold and downright nasty priest or nun or teacher or social worker or supposedly caring professional.

^{iv} Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 178-179.

^v ...whether or not we say we base them on the authority of God’s Word (in scripture and in the incarnate Jesus Christ).

^{vi} W.E.B. Du Bois, *Prayers for Dark People* (Herbert Aptheker, ed. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980)