

Sunday, October 1, 2023
Matthew 21:23-32
“Who Gives Us the Authority?”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

There once was a tough-minded football coach who had high expectations for his football players. At the conclusion of one practice, he demanded that his players run three miles that night, do two hundred push-ups, and study the playbook for a least an hour. And all of the first-string superstar players shouted out: “You can count on us coach. We’ll do that.” That night, all of the first-string players gathered at the captain’s house to begin their exercises, but they happened to turn on the television set and the professional wrestling championships were on. Within a short time, the players were slouched comfortably onto the couch.

At the conclusion of that same football practice earlier in the day, when the coach insisted on running, push-ups, and studying the playbook, the third-string players whined out loud: “What do you mean, coach? We never get to play anyway. Why should we do all that work?” Later that night, when gathered over at the home of the “water-boy”, the third-string players flicked on the television set, watched it for a second, and groaned when someone said, “Come on, let’s run those miles, do the pushups and study that playbook.” The third-string players had a change of heart and went and did all the work. (1) And eventually, who do you think became some of the new first-string players?

So, which is better- the person who signs up to sing in the choir but never shows up to a single practice or the one who when asked to sign up says, “Oh, I could never do that, I’m not a professional singer, I’m not good enough for the choir!” But comes anyway just to try it out and becomes one of the most faithful choir members! Which is better – the person who signs up to help with the Christmas Bazaar but never shows up for a meeting and backs out at the last minute or the one who when asked to help at first says, “Oh, I could never help run such a large event”, but then steps in, asks her friends to help and actually helps run most of the Bazaar! Which is better? Well, you get the point. Life is more than just talking the talk; you’ve got to also walk the walk.

It is the beginning of Jesus’ last week on earth. He has healed the sick, comforted the afflicted, forgiven the sinful, broken bread with the outcasts, overturned the tables of the moneychangers, and today, he decides to enter the temple again, and sit down and teach the people. Well, the ones in authority, the chief priests and elders, the ones who just witnessed him making a mockery of their Temple, they have just about had it. They go over and say to Jesus, “hey, who gave you the right to do all these things you are doing? By whose authority?”

Back then what gave people authority was their social standing which was ascribed to them at birth and honored through their education and reputation. Assuming that Jesus’ birth status and such, provided no authority for the way he was acting, these men assume Jesus was “given” this authority by someone, and that “person” could explain his actions. But instead, Jesus forces his opponents to recognize the fact that he, like John the Baptist, already had credibility in the eyes of the people, already had plenty of authority.

Let’s talk about authority for a minute. Authority, we must keep in mind, in today’s world, is given but not at birth. There is a difference between power – the sheer ability to do something or bring something about – and authority – when one’s ability to do, say, or make something

derives from having been delegated or given that ability. Authority, in short, is power that has been given, directed, and limited to achieve a particular end. And those in authority over us have it only because we have given it to them. Get it?

Let me give you an example, I am granted authority as a pastor. But Jesus' words remind me that I can never presume that authority or take it for granted. It is sacred. As soon as I think I deserve to be here I have violated that space. That is different from saying I belong here, or I am invited here. I think the problem some churches face is in giving their pastors too much authority and power over the congregation. Like somehow our sermons have so much authority, that all you need to do to be saved is come to church, listen to my sermon and you're good to go! I'm not that good! Somehow pastors are seen as experts in the Bible, resident theologians, having all wisdom and knowledge about religious things. The problem is we don't and what this does is create a congregation who lacks a personal relationship with God, their faith and the Bible. Not because you don't know God or know the Bible or don't have enough information about your faith or about the Bible. I am so proud that you are holding your own bible studies even without a pastor present because it means that you know you can read and listen and watch and trust your own experience with God and God's word.

Power and authority and who has it – has been an issue that has never faded over the years! Just look at our politicians! Did any of you watch that horrible Republican debate last week? All that self-serving power, I couldn't do it.

Jesus, always one step ahead of those in authority in his day, answers their question with a question, telling them, if you answer my question correctly, I'll answer yours, and tell you by what authority I do these things. So, the question – did the Baptism of John come from heaven or from human origin? Basically, he is asking them, in a very public place, with a lot of people listening, was John on God's mission or just some crazy guy? Ah, a trick question for sure and they know it, for if they say John's mission was ordained from heaven or was of divine origin then Jesus will say, why don't you as the religious authorities, believe in him too, as the others do? How can you ignore God's will if John was one of God's chosen ones to bring people to repentance?

Or if they say John was acting just like every other human being, trying to get a little attention, then the crowds might protest because he was quite the popular preacher and they all believed he was a prophet; these guys might have a huge riot on their hands! So, what do they do - they cop out and plead ignorance, saying, "Uh, we don't know". "Fine," Jesus says, "then I won't tell you – I'll just tell you a little story". And the cleverness continues. You see, everyone knew Jesus' authority came from God and I'm betting those leaders knew that the "person" they were asking about who gave him this authority was really God, but they just couldn't accept it.

The story Jesus tells is of a man who had two sons. One day the father turns to the first son and says, "Go and work in the vineyard today" and the son says, "No, I'm not doing that" – but later changes his mind and goes anyway. To the second son he says, "Go and work in the vineyard today" and the son says, "Okay, sure" but doesn't go at all. So, Jesus asks, which son did the will of the father – isn't it obvious, the leaders answer "the first son, of course". "Actions speak louder than words" we would say and so we believe the first son, despite his abrupt, if not somewhat obnoxious, refusal of his father's command is the one who did the will of his father.

But notice Jesus never says, "You're right, good and faithful servants". Because if you think about it, both sons weren't all that great. I never would have gotten away with either approach with my parents, would you have? Say yes and then defy them and not do what was asked? No way! Say no – period – to what they asked to you do? Are you kidding me?!

However, as one theologian states, "When we focus too closely on the two sons, and their response to their father's requests, we may fail to see that there is a third son in the parable: Jesus. Jesus is the one whose yes is yes and whose no is no. He is the one who inaugurates the kingdom of heaven, the same kingdom [we] are participating in." (2)

And the true point of the story is that the first son who said no - then did the right thing, had a change of heart and a change of heart, repentance, admitting when we fall short, striving for a better way of living, is what Jesus' message was all about. That is why the tax collectors and prostitutes, those marginalized at that time, were going into the kingdom of God ahead of those in authority, because they knew the true meaning of turning around, changing their old way of life into a new life in Christ.

We are a people like the first son, we are a church made up of the ones who change their minds, those who are forgiven, given second chances, to turn around, repent and begin a new path. God is the master of second chances. But the chief priests and elders, who always said "yes" to the ways of God, the ways of righteousness, even after seeing the truth right in front of them, wouldn't believe. There was their authority, he was standing in front of them, and they couldn't even see it.

This parable, as is all of God's word to us, is a living word, it isn't some ancient history, it continues to speak to us today, especially because history continues to repeat itself and we need to keep hearing this message! So how many of us can do both, walk and talk the ways of God? It's the difference between the one who says the right thing and the one who does the right thing. Those who only pay lip service to God and those who, maybe set out on the wrong track, but change their minds and get on the right one.

I have been reading – okay listening to, it's a long commute – the book for our Women's Retreat titled, "The Best Yes: Making Wise Decisions in the Midst of Endless Demands." And this is precisely some of what the author is trying to convey to the reader. Serving in the church, in our community, in our families, is not about saying yes to everything we think Jesus or others would want us to do, it's using our "best" yes because sometimes the answer is no. Because if you can't fulfill what you are being asked to do or you walk away from something asked of you or don't show up at all, that's not your best yes. That's not serving Christ. She states, "What consumes my thinking will be the making or the breaking of my identity." Because there is a big difference between saying yes to everyone and saying yes to God. The authority Jesus was talking about here, also means conviction. The decisions we make, where we put our heart and time and energy matter.

I remember one Vacation Bible School where with the curriculum came those bracelets, oh, you've probably seen them from time to time. They have on them – WWJD – which stands for What Would Jesus Do? - and you are supposed to wear them all the time and before making any kind of decision you are to look down and think – WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? And I'm sure we've all thought, as I did, isn't that cute, but kind of silly. But really, I wonder if out there in the big world or dare I say, even in the church - if any of our decisions or answers or treatment of people or actions toward others might be a bit different if we simply paused and

asked ourselves, what would God think about what I'm about to do or say? What should I be doing with my actions? Where is God's Best yes for me?

Jesus willingly took on the human mind, body and spirit in self-giving love. The body of Christ and the Blood of Christ which is commemorated in our ritual of Holy Communion. Jesus had the ultimate power and the ultimate authority, and yet was not full of himself, just the opposite; he emptied himself and became the will of God in the world. He didn't exploit the fact that he came from God; had God's authority and power; he became like a slave, humbling himself to a cross. And having done that – God exalted him – raising his name so every knee shall bow, every tongue confess - Jesus is Lord. There is Christ's authority loud and clear.

If we care, really care about this living word, God's word to us, we should strive to share in that same spirit, take courage from Christ, show real compassion and sympathy to others, say yes and mean it but know we are given thousands of second chances to repent and begin again. So, whose company do you prefer? Those who say they are Christian but don't live it, or those who don't say anything about it but live it quite clearly? May we all be given the courage and power and authority to go in God's love and try our very best to talk the talk as well as walk the walk. May it be so, Amen.

(1) Markquart, The Rev. Edward. "Two Sons: Yeses that Don't Mean a Darn Thing!"

www.sermonsfromseattle.com.

(2) Nanko-Ferandez, Carmen and Hamman, Jaco. "Lectionary Homiletics", September, 2008.