

Empty Words
A Sermon on Matthew 21:23-32
Proper 21
October 1, 2023

Introduction

We have an authority crisis today. In politics, in the church, in our schools, in our families. Questioning authority is one of the enduring legacies of the Enlightenment. We can't seem to get large groups of people to agree on anything. What people once thought was objective truth has been revealed oftentimes to be the ideology of the people in power, usually white men of northern European ancestry. Whatever we try to replace it with seems to be the subjective beliefs and perspectives of competing groups.

The people of Judea faced an authority crisis in the first century. When the Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E., the Judeans lost the focal point of their worship of God. Matthew's text today addresses that crisis.

First Move: Authority in Matthew's Day

This story takes place during Passion Week. Since Mary's text last week, the lectionary skips several stories in Matthew, including Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the cleansing of the Temple. Today and the next two weeks will be controversy dialogues between Jesus and the authorities in the Temple. They ask him, "By what authority are you doing these things?"

This was a live question in Matthew's community. They were engaged in conflict with Judeans about the direction that Judaism should take. We know Second Temple Judaism evolved into rabbinic Judaism. The Pharisees are the forefathers of the rabbis. Matthew's community argued that Jesus should be the center of faith instead of the rabbis.

The historical Jesus may have jostled in the Temple with religious leaders, but New Testament scholars believe that the controversy dialogues between Jesus and various religious leaders most likely reflect the debates that took place after the destruction of the Temple, 40 years after Jesus was crucified. We have to remember that Paul proudly proclaims in his letters that he is still a Pharisee. Jesus may have been a Pharisee. By Matthew's day, the Pharisees had come into conflict with the followers of Jesus. The great mass of the Jewish people rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

The early church conceived of the opponents of their day--Pharisees, scribes, and the elders of the people--as typical opponents of Jesus.

Jesus' opponents try to trap him with a question about authority. They believe that they have authority to interpret Scripture, and they believe they are justified in asking him. Matthew has stated repeatedly that he believes Jesus' authority comes from God, but his opponents don't believe that. They need to be convinced.

The followers of Jesus have recognized Jesus as having divine authority, and the chief priests and elders want to disabuse them of that belief. If Jesus says that his authority comes from God, that could be viewed as blasphemous. If Jesus says that his authority comes from men rather than God, he would be undermining his own authority.

It is a clever question. Matthew depicts Jesus as a quick-witted rabbi, one who is more persuasive than the religious authorities. Jesus asks a question that raises a similar dilemma if it is answered: "From where was the baptism of John? From heaven or from men?" The high priests and the elders of the people ponder among themselves and recognize that there is no good answer.

They respond, "We do not know." Jesus says that if they cannot answer his question, he will not answer their question.

Jesus follows up his question with a parable about a man who had two sons. This parable almost certainly comes from Matthew not the historical Jesus. Brandon Scott does not even list this parable in his commentary on parables.

The father approaches the first son and tells him to go work in the vineyard. The son dishonors the father to his face by saying that he refuses to go. He later changes his mind and goes. The second son said he would go to the vineyard, but he does not go.

Both sons have shamed their father, but at least the second son obeys his father and goes into the vineyard.

Matthew reads parables allegorically. The first son represents the Israelites who follow the law. Matthew implies that they say they are faithful to the law, but they often break the commandments. The second son represents the tax collectors and prostitutes who violate the commandments but who flocked to Jesus and John the Baptist and are now part of Matthew's community.

Jesus asks, "Which of the two did the will of [the] father?" The answer is obvious. The high priests and elders of the people have been trapped; they pass judgment on themselves by choosing the first son. Jesus says, "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, but you saw and did not change your minds later to believe him.”

Tax collectors and prostitutes were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Prostitute is a translation of the Greek word, πόρνη, which means one who commits sexual depravity. The understanding of sexual depravity can change over the centuries. A few years ago it would have meant LGBTQ folks in the eyes of a lot of conservative Christians. Today the attacks are focused on trans people.

This is the answer to the original question, “By what authority do you do these things?” Jesus takes a roundabout way of answering to offer his vision of the kingdom of God. That is a more robust answer than simply saying, “By God’s authority.” Jesus tells the people what kind of God he believes in. John Dominic Crossan says, “You believe in God, great, that doesn’t tell me much. What kind of God do you believe in?” Jesus says: a God who welcomes tax collectors and prostitutes into the kingdom first. Jesus doesn’t say that the religious authorities won’t be admitted to the kingdom, just that they will be admitted after the tax collectors and prostitutes.

Second Move: Authority in Our Day

I believe that we still are dealing with the aftershocks of the Enlightenment that are unsettling for religious beliefs today, just as the destruction of the Temple was for Judeans in the first century.

I hope to do a sermon series next spring on Original Blessing not Original Sin. This semester I am taking an independent study in seminary on the classical doctrine of original sin. Original sin needs to be radically reinterpreted today if it is going to be credible to people. It is still credible to fundamentalists and literalists, but not to most other people, religious and non-religious alike. The problem is that original sin is the foundation on which large parts of Christian doctrine are based, such as salvation and the role of the church. St. Augustine did not create the doctrine of original sin whole cloth; instead he molded beliefs from early Christians into the classical doctrine as we know it. Augustine believed that Jesus was the savior, but what did he save people from? A universal savior needs to answer a universal problem. Augustine concluded that all of humanity has inherited original sin from Adam. Jesus died for our sins to save us from original sin.

I will go into this in much more detail next spring, but if you start pulling at the threads of the classical doctrine, you have to be careful that the whole fabric doesn’t fall apart. I believe that fundamentalists understand that; that is why they cling so fiercely to the literal truth of the Genesis creation story.

The doctrine of original sin were accepted as authority by Christians for most of the last 2,000 years. We live on the other side of Darwin's theory of evolution. We can no longer believe that Adam and Eve were the first two people that God created. We can no longer believe that we inherited sin from Adam. If that authority is undermined, what do you replace it with? There are lots of deep and meaningful theologies out there today, but none of them has preempted the field. Objective truth is getting harder to find. We have to get comfortable with many subjective truths. That deepens and enriches our own understanding of truth. People from different backgrounds are going to have different perspectives on many issues. Right-wing conservatives can't tolerate that. They insist that what they call *patriotic history* is the only history that can be taught in public schools. They want to ignore the perspectives of women and immigrants and people of color.

There is still a place for authority in church. I firmly believe that the authority of the minister comes in large part from his or her knowledge of the Bible and ability to interpret it and apply it to life today. That is why you are willing to listen to Mary or Russ or me talk each week.

Our authority only points to the authority of the historical Jesus and the apostle Paul. They in turn were proclaiming the gospel that they believed came to them from God. Jesus and Paul believed in universal salvation. God wants to heal everybody. God wants to save everybody. The church has never really believed that. Augustine believed that only a small remnant would be saved. Calvin shared that belief. He thought that all humans were wretched sinners and deserved eternal damnation; only by the grace of God would a few be saved. Unfortunately, the church has acted on those beliefs.

One thing that many contemporary theologies emphasize is praxis. That means putting your theology into practice. Your religious beliefs are just empty words unless you act on them. That is a big reason that so many people, especially young people, have given up on the church. They don't see people in the church acting much like Jesus. Too many of them act more like political partisans.

In the last few years political conservatives have started calling themselves evangelicals even if they don't go to church. Evangelicals have voted as a solid conservative bloc for decades. Their political beliefs more than religious beliefs seem to be driving their actions. Young people can see that. The members of mainline churches are evenly divided in their political affiliations. Mainline churches still have hope that their actions will be motivated more by faith than by political ideology. Disciples actually can be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world if we

model how people of diverse political beliefs can work together and form cohesive communities.

The emphasis on working together brings us into conflict with classical Protestant thought on faith versus works. The New Testament does not speak with one voice on faith versus works. Matthew and James would disagree with Paul. I think even Paul would disagree with the way that Paul has been interpreted by Protestants. The Sermon on the Mount, which was edited in its final form by Matthew, closes by saying: “whoever hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.”

We as a church emphasize doing over believing. We welcome the tax collectors and sinners of our day. We have ministries to LGBTQ+ folks, to men on death row, to immigrants and refugees seeking asylum. We welcome everybody because that is the gospel as we understand it from Jesus and Paul: God wants to save everybody.

Most of the men that I have talked to on death row have poor self-images. They believe that people on the outside hate them and think they are monsters. Part of my call is to help people see the humanity of the men on death row. The flip side of that is helping the men to recognize their own humanity. Affirm them, build them up. Let them know that God accepts them, just as they are.

The authority that we recognize is the authority of ministering to the least of these, affirming all people as beloved children of God and welcoming all people into the beloved community.

Conclusion

This is my last sermon at Edmond Trinity Christian Church. My next sermon will be in two weeks for Disciples Christian Church.

We have talked a lot about visioning in the last five years. What are we going to do to help build the church? We can't compete in programming with the non-denominational churches that surround us. They dwarf us in resources. We can offer an authentic witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ through our actions. Perhaps that will draw people to us, seeing a little church that dares to do great things because we dare to believe in a God worth worshipping. We follow Jesus and leave the results to God.

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