

Authority or Authoritarian? January 11, 2026

Luke 19: 45-20:8
Walker

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This past week we have experienced a whirlwind of distressing news, particularly from the US. The new year started with the US President ordering military action against Venezuela that resulted in the kidnapping and so called arrest of the Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro. The Venezuelan leader was viewed by many as an authoritarian leader and dictator, who stole an election and brutalized his people. So, his removal caused celebrations by many Venezuelans both in and outside of the country. However, the removal of one leader by another country, goes against international law and the UN commitments to a rules based international order that rejects might makes right. The United States has abandoned these commitments and it's own democratic processes including that any military action needs to be approved by the congress. This action has been followed by threats to other sovereign nations such as Columbia, Cuba and Greenland. We know all to well that Canada could be next as one who has been experiencing pressure from this US Administration. It raises grave concerns globally and we could ask the question of where does the US President get the authority to take these actions?

In our scripture reading today, the religious authorities ask Jesus "by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?" One of these things that led to this question is the turning of the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. Jesus was upset about what was going on in the Temple with the moneychangers and chased them out, telling them that 'My house', should be a house of prayer, but you have made it into a den of robbers or thieves. The money changers were part of a system that had been established in the Temple. In this passage, it was the Passover festival and people would have traveled from far and wide to come to Jerusalem. Thus, they would have money from all over. It was the rules of the Temple that only shekels could be used to pay the Temple tax, inside the temple. So, they needed the moneychangers to exchange their currency. People travelled long distances and were not able to bring their own animals for sacrifice so they purchased them at the temple, again with shekels. Jesus was upset that these transactions were happening in the temple, a place of worship. A sacred place had become a marketplace,

and the money changers were making money off others, and there is some indication that the moneychangers were charging unfair rates to the people.

The Chief priests in charge of the temple were appointed by the Roman authorities and controlled the priests and benefited from the marketplace profits. Jesus would have known that his disruption would have gotten the attention as well of the Roman authorities. He could have been just as upset with the complicity of the religious establishment with Rome.

Another element of this context is that the marketplace was situated in the Court of Gentiles which would leave less room for them to worship. Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7 the full text of which reads: "My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations". We know part of Jesus' ministry evolved to include the Gentiles. So, what Jesus was angry about that led to his act of turning the tables in the temple could be for a combination of reasons.

The religious authorities then were asking, by what authority do you do these things to try and trap Jesus. However, Jesus responds and trips them up with his own question back about where John got his authority. This traps them because they knew either way they answered, from God or from humans, they would look bad. Jesus asking this question also essentially equated him and John the Baptist, indicating that they both have authority from God. Jesus' life and actions are clear that he gets his authority from God. It is evidenced by the way he knew the scripture and the law; by the way he loved and had compassion for others, especially those outcast and excluded in society; by the fruit of the spirit that he bore: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Any leader that bears these qualities, could be said to bear witness to God's authority.

There are times that we probably find ourselves asking where do some leaders get their authority to do what they do. I am sure that many Americans (and a lot of Canadians) are asking that of President Trump these days. Some may be asking it of Prime Ministry Carney as well. Generally, we understand that leaders of democratic nations get their authority because the majority of the people elected them. A good leader will recognize that they are the leader of all the people of the country, not just of the ones who voted for them. What happens when they don't act on behalf of all the people or when they do things unexpected or not presented in their platform? When actions of a leader are surprisingly out of sync with

what they campaigned on or what the country usually stands for, the authority of the leader could be questioned, and they move into the territory of becoming an authoritarian leader. One that has little regard for the rule of law, the people, or the democratic process. It seems we are witnessing this more and more south of the border.

What is our response when this happens? Jesus called the religious authorities and the people carrying out the injustice to account. In today's reading it was through an angry act. Elsewhere in the gospel stories it was through story and parable, or by action – caring for those who others wouldn't, naming salvation has come when a corrupt tax collector repents, challenging the religious authorities about their practices and hypocrisy, and there are many other examples we could name. For us, we do our best to protest injustice and work for change. We join movements, write letters to our political representatives, advocate for change, or read books to educate ourselves. Vigils and protests are an important action in times like these. We pray for peace and justice. We seek to live out the love and compassion that Jesus exemplified.

As we seek to live faithfully in these times, we are called to live in God's faithfulness and carry out God's authority. Authority that bears the fruit of the Spirit, that embraces love and justice, and challenges injustice and stands for peace. May we live up to our calling. Amen.