

Matthew 21:23-32

Authority. We hear again the authority police – the religious leaders and the elders, questioning Jesus about where he thinks his authority comes from. The funny thing is the crowds acknowledge his authority. He has recently come into Jerusalem on that last Palm Sunday ride on a colt. The people praise him and shout Hosanna! Then he enters the temple and clears out the money changers and those making a mockery of the Holy temple. After going to the city of Bethany for the night he curses a fig tree that had no fruit for him and it withered and died right away. He enters the temple for the second day in a row. His authority is questioned, and he begins to teach several parables while in the temple. If I were a member of the religious authorities, I would have questioned Jesus' authority too. What right does he have to come and takeover their place of worship? Who gives him this authority?

Interestingly, Jesus responds to the leaders with a riddle. I will ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things.”

The question itself, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” The leaders bickered with each other trying to figure out the right answer only to say, “We don't know.” So he responds, “Well, I am not going to tell you where my authority comes from.”

I want to talk now about the issue of authority and obedience.

On one important level, the topic at hand is authority, as the religious authorities challenge Jesus' right to teach and preach, particularly in the Temple, and Jesus in turn reverses their challenge and ensnares them in their own trap.

But to be honest, I think there's essentially one thing we need to keep in mind about authority: *it's given*. This is the primary 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.

This is the connection between *authority* and its linguistic siblings *authorize* and *author*. One has authority to do things because one has been authorized to do them by the author, the one with the actual power. Authority is always and only something given.

But authority is given in two ways. That is, not only is authority given by those “above” with the power, it's just as often given by those “below” who decide to accept the authority of another.

And here's the thing: in about 99% of the cases of our life, those with authority over us have it *only because we give it to them*. The colleague who slighted us, the child who disappointed us, even the spouse or parent who abandoned us – yes, in each case the person in question may have actually done something to harm us, even something catastrophic; nevertheless, the way we regard that action and person over time is something we get to determine. If we are still angry, hurt, disappointed, or

upset, it's because *we have decided to give authority to that person or event to continue to influence and even dominate our lives*. We may have been victimized, but we choose whether or not we will live as a victim.

It's only against this background that we can make sense of the parable Jesus tells his debaters. I mean, what does this story of two sons have to do with authority in the traditional sense? Pretty much nothing. But it has everything to do with how we regard the past. One son says he'll help out and doesn't follow through – I sympathize. The other son, however, is the focus of the parable. For he says he will not help, but does. Whatever may have motivated his initial response – he was already committed, he was feeling overwhelmed by prior obligations, he was annoyed that his father is always asking for help, he nursed a grudge about a time he felt his father didn't help him, whatever – he recognizes that the future is always open. He can still respond to his father's request and invitation, and as he does he proves himself faithful and lives into his father's hopes for him.

At this pivotal moment in Matthew's story about Jesus, and through this deceptively simple parable, Jesus is inviting his adversaries into an open future, one not dominated by the arguments and opposition of the past, but one that is open to the movement of God's spirit to heal, revive, restore, and make all things new. The chief priests and elders do not accept this invitation. They have too much at stake in the past – it has created for them their primary identity and, whatever its limitations, they have become dependent on that identity – and so they refuse to trade that past for an open future. But those who are down and out, those who discover that the identity created

by their past does not bring them life – represented here by “tax collectors and prostitutes,” two categories of people whose actions supposedly remove them beyond the pale of decent society – grab hold of Jesus’ promise with both hands.

And here’s the thing: Jesus makes this same promise to us. No matter what we have done, no matter what may have been done to us, the future is still open. Whatever hurt we may have experienced or done in the past is, ultimately, in the past. We do not have to allow it to determine or dominate our future. We do not have to drag our past on our back the way a snail does its shell. We are, finally, more than the sum total of all that has happened to us. The future is open. It may be hard – really, really hard – to let go of the past and walk into the future. The past, after all, we at least know, and even our dysfunctional identities are at least familiar, whereas the future is so open it can be scary.

And certainly we are invited to step into the open future God has created. But to tell you the truth, I don’t think the focus of this scene and parable is on us nearly as much as it is on God. God the author of all life who regularly decides to invite a new relationship with us. God who will not count our past deeds, mistakes, griefs, or hurts against us. God who refuses to define us by what we do (or what has been done to us), but instead regards us always and only as God’s beloved children.

Jesus offers love, forgiveness, compassion, and the courage and path to justice. He is the ultimate authority on these matters. Give him power — and trust and do your best to obey how he tells you to go about living. Amen.