

Sermon: Proper 21A
Title: Jesus' Authority
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord. Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from the Triune God. Amen.

I have found that when we are faced with some of these hard Gospel texts (you know the ones, we have been reading and meditating on them for at least the past month), we are called to wrestle with the hard topics. The topics that we would sometimes rather push under the rug. We can push them under the rug for a while, but they will always come back out. The truth of God's Word will always prevail.

So, we wrestle with the Gospel texts, attempt to figure out what they may be telling us, and figure out how they are speaking into our lives.

As I wrestled with our Gospel text this week, the question that continued to pop into my head was: "When, if ever, will we ever stop questioning Jesus' authority?" That is the question I continued to wrestle with. And I think it is the question that continued to present itself repeatedly throughout the verses of our Gospel text.

The chief priests and elders questioned Jesus' authority, the sons questioned the Father's authority, and there are times when we question Jesus' authority, either intentionally or unintentionally. We do this when we doubt whether or not Jesus is active in the world; when we wonder if God will provide for our daily needs. We know deep down that he will. He always has, and he always will.

So, let's back up a little bit and take a look at our gospel lesson a little bit closer.

Our Gospel text is found right after Jesus throws the money changers out of the temple. We find ourselves faced with a Jesus who *may be just a little bit upset*. A Jesus who may be frustrated with finding human challenges everywhere he goes. A Jesus who may (or may not) wish that people would open their eyes and understand who he was and why he came.

Or rather, those might be some of the human feelings running through his body. Remember, Jesus was both fully human and fully God. Jesus would have felt the emotions you and I would feel in certain situations, but ALSO was fully God and would have known what the overarching picture and goal was!

Jesus entered the temple, found the chief priests and the elders approaching him. You can probably bet that they weren't coming to see Jesus for a social call. Instead, they ask Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Talk about calling Jesus' identity directly into question.

Jesus has never hidden the fact that he is God's son, sent to find the lost sheep, and save those who love him. This has NEVER been a secret. But the chief priests and elders have a tough time accepting this man, who was gentle, and kind, and cared for those on the fringes of society.

The chief priests and elders knew a messiah was coming. Remember that Matthew, the author of our Gospel text, was writing to a predominantly Jewish society, who had access to the Hebrew scriptures that foretold the coming of a Messiah to save them. But the Israelites, the Jewish people, expected a warrior, a fighter, someone brash and outgoing: a military leader. One who could conquer the Israelite's enemies by force if needed.

Instead, the Savior and Messiah of the world came in the form of an infant in a manger. A man who walked among those who were considered less than nothing. A man who befriended sinners, in all shapes and sizes. So, if one followed assumed logic, this clearly must not be the messiah they were waiting for.

Jesus as Messiah was one who brought power through healing and reconciliation, rather than alienation and violence.

Therefore, the chief priests and elders, the leaders of the Jewish faith, took every opportunity they could to try and challenge Jesus' authority.

How does Jesus respond to the question posed to him? He asks his own question right back: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Which of course seems like a trick question.

The chief priests and elders argue among themselves, which is a common occurrence for them, knowing that if they answer one way they will be trapped by Jesus, but if they answer the other way, they will anger the crowds. Quite the predicament for our poor chief priests and elders.

The chief priests and elders are afraid to take a stand. They are afraid to say what they really believed for fear of getting into trouble by one side or the other.

How many times are we afraid to say what we genuinely believe because we fear the outcome? We fear people will think less of us. We fear we will be ostracized or cast out. We fear ourselves and we fear others. But if we stop doubting Jesus' authority in the world, perhaps this fear will disappear.

The chief priests and elders respond to Jesus' question with the standard, "We don't know." So, in fair turnabout, Jesus tells them he won't answer their question about who gives him the authority to do what he does.

And just when you think the conversation is complete, that we are at an impasse, and there is nowhere else to go, Jesus adds one more parable. One more layer for us to think about and reflect on.

Jesus says that a man had two sons. He asked the first to go work in the vineyard. The son said he was not going to go, but then later changed his mind and went. The father asked his second son the same thing, to go work in the vineyard. The second son tells his father that he will go to work in the vineyard, but then never goes.

Jesus asks the crowds, who did the will of the father, and the people respond with **the first**. Then Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

This would have been deeply upsetting for the chief priests and elders. The tax collectors and sinners, the prostitutes and lowly people getting into heaven ahead of them? That would not have been okay or acceptable in their minds.

My initial question of doubting God’s authority morphed at this point into: “Which son from Jesus’ parable are we?” Are we the children who say they will do something and then never complete it? Or are we the first one who said “no,” but then later went and did it? Jesus says that it is better to say you will not go do something and then change your mind and do it, then to agree to do something, and then fail to follow through.

Our actions, and the actions of those around us, speak much louder than any words we utter. The first son’s words were “no,” but his actions were a “yes.” Whereas the second son’s words were “yes,” but his actions were “no.”

Which son are we? Do our actions match our words? Are our actions more fruitful than our words? What happens when our words and our actions do not align?

So where is the good news in this passage? That is the question I always try to find when I am faced with these texts that cause me to wrestle with my thoughts.

The good news comes in two ways. The first, that regardless of how often we question Jesus’ authority, his authority does not and will not change. No matter how much we wish our Savior was one that eliminated our enemies and wiped them off the playing field, we, instead, have a Savior who bleeds for his people, very literally. In Jesus, we have someone who loves his people, and cares for them, who shows God’s very real power through healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Because at the end of the day, alienation and violence will never get us anywhere.

The second part of the good news in this gospel is the fact that Jesus’ words ALWAYS match his actions. What you see is what you get. And what you hear is what you find. As humans, our words and actions may not always align, for better and for worse. But with Jesus, that is

never the case. Jesus will never back out of a promise, he will always follow through, and he will **always** provide: no ifs, ands, or buts.

My challenge and prayer for you this week is two-fold. May you open your eyes and heart and see just how often Jesus provides for your every daily need. And second, may you realize that the king of the universe has authority over all things, and eventually he will win the day. And this is very good news. Amen.

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