

For Prayer of the Day:

Creating God, you made us in your own image. You have redeemed us through Jesus, your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family. Take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts. Break down the walls that separate us. Unite us in bonds of love. Through our struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth.

October 1, 2023 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction to Themes for the Day

Imagine someone claiming to be God's chosen coming in and disrupting how we do things? We might well ask by what or whose authority are you doing all of this. Religious leaders ask that very question of Jesus—we might ask a different question: What kind of authority does Jesus exercise and what does that look like in the world?

Gospel Reading Matthew 21:23-32

23When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" 24Jesus said to them, I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, If we say, From heaven, he will say to us, Why then did you not believe him? 26But if we say, Of human origin, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." 27So they answered Jesus, We do not know." And he said to them, Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

28 What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, Son, go and work in the vineyard today. 29He answered, I will not ; but later he changed his mind and went. 30The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, I go, sir ; but he did not go. 31Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, The first." Jesus said to them, Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him,

but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Sermon:

Four things NOT happening in today's Gospel reading:

1. Jesus isn't asking for us to sign off on planks of his political platform. What IS happening: He's asking us to live our lives in light of our attachment to him.
2. Jesus is NOT de-establishing any religion. What IS happening: Jesus is fulfilling everything the faith of his ancestors aspires to and calls us to be about.
3. Jesus is NOT innovating: What IS Happening: Jesus is calling us back to our roots in which we love God and neighbour.
4. Jesus is NOT excluding anybody when he says the riff raff are going into God's realm AHEAD NOT instead of those he's speaking to. What IS happening: there are some who are getting what Jesus is up to and for now it's NOT the righteous and religious types.

Where might a preacher get all of this? It helps to know there were key events that happened that stir up the question "by what authority". For openers, Jesus and his followers have staged a parody of Roman processions as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and people cry out "Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Jesus has gone into the temple and jammed the works of its commercial enterprise reestablishing the temple as a place of prayer. So yeah, people are bound to ask questions..."by what authority do you do all this and while we're at it what's with all the healing, feeding, and forgiving stuff you're lavishing about?"

Let's ask another question about authority: What does Jesus' authority look like? Here are three responses that are helpful, yet not exhaustive:

1. This first one is a bit of a leap in that it comes from the letter Paul and not right out of the Gospel text. Paul says.... OK sorry I better rewind. Paul is quoting lyrics from one of the first hymns Christ followers would sing when

they got together.: Paul calls us to take on Jesus mindset...the Jesus who has every right to claim equality with God. This same one who lives among us as a servant, willingly giving up his life for us. That very act of self emptying and service becomes the most God-like and praise worthy thing, Paul writes.

2. We learn in Matthew's Gospel illustrates that self—giving by telling us how Jesus resists temptations to throw around earthly or supernatural power to bring about God's loving purposes on earth.
3. We hear Jesus preach God's favour upon the poor, those who mourn, the meek, merciful and those who wage peace. Then he calls on us to be a faith community where the Sermon on the Mount gets lived out.

Churches and individuals might struggle with the tension between our trust in Christ and the actions that come from it. Let's put two quotes out there side by side—I think they're consistent with what Jesus tells us all when he tells that story about saying what we'll do or not do and the doing:

Let's give the last word today to one of the people whose name is on our church sign, and letterhead: Pastor Dr. Martin Luther—bear in mind he was always warning us about thinking our good deeds impress God enough to win God over. Herr Luther says, “God doesn't need your good works; Your neighbour does.”