

By Whose Authority?

Philippians 2:5-12; Matthew 21:23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders asked him “By whose authority are you doing these things?”

In his book *Telling Secrets*, Frederick Buechner tells of a time when he went to visit his mother in Manhattan. She had long looked forward to his visit, as he had. She had prepared a gourmet meal for him. They were going to have a lovely evening together. But just as they were about to sit down to eat, the phone rang. It was a friend of Buechner's. This friend had just learned that his family had been in a terrible accident. He was at the airport waiting for a plane to fly to be with his family. He called Buechner to see if he would come and sit with him at the airport. He was frightened. He was worried. He needed somebody to be with him. Well, the meal was getting cold and Buechner's mother was furious at his decision to leave her and this great meal she had prepared to go be with the friend. Buechner writes, "For a moment I was horrified to find myself thinking that maybe she was right. Then the next moment I saw more clearly than I ever had before that it is on just such outwardly trivial decisions as this —should I go or should I stay—that human souls are saved or lost."

At some point our beliefs must become actions or they become nothing at all.

The scribes and Pharisees have a problem. There is this guy Jesus who has come to town. As Matthew tells us the story, the pressure has been building the closer Jesus gets to Jerusalem. The crowds are growing, but so is the opposition. Some shouted “Hosanna” when he showed up, others began to plot his death. Now he is in the big city. And it all comes to a head.

The authorities, the powers who run the city, who have the ability to compel some obedience, and to punish disobedience, these authorities have to decide what to do about Jesus. Should they leave him alone; promote him; run him out of town; string him up as an example? They decide to question Jesus themselves, to decide whether he is a threat, a nuisance, a problem, or a nut job. I mean, he talks like he is on a first named basis with the Almighty. And folk say that miraculous things happen around him, but we all know how rumors get going.

So they confront Jesus: “By whose authority do you do these things: cleanse the temple of money changers, teach on the messiah, heal the sick on the temple steps.” Now what they really want to know is this – are you for us or against us? Will you help us, do what we say, walk our way? Or are you here to make trouble for us and all that we have worked so hard for?

Are you a problem or a present? Though they ask a question, they already know what answer they are looking for. "Jesus, who are you working for? Who sent you?"

Jesus says "Fair enough. That is a reasonable question. But first answer me this. John the baptizer, down by the river Jordan, how do you read him. Was he heaven sent, or just a wild man out there on his own. How do you rate John?" Was he heaven inspired, or just a loose cannon?"

Now lots of people were touched by John's ministry down by the Jordan; ex-cons got their lives back together; broken homes were mended; lost souls found hope again; addicts entered recovery after taking a dip in John's river revival. People began taking down walls of race and class in response to the news that the kingdom of heaven is very close. They began to share their lives and their possessions with those in need.

Jesus wants to know if they can see the hand of God at work, if they can name it out loud.

So the scribes and Pharisees hold a quick caucus. "If we say "from heaven" he will want to know why we did not go down to see John. If we say "he was just a wild card," the people will get mad at us. They all like John. What do the latest polls say? How can we phrase this with some plausible deniability? We have a lot to lose, so we better be careful.

So they say "We neither condemn John, nor endorse him. He is very interesting. That John is really something. The matter is still under investigation. There is a committee looking into that. We will get back to you."

Jesus says "Then talk to the hand. If you did not listen to John, you will not listen to me either."

Jesus does not give up on people, not even on the chief priests and the scribes. He tells them and us a parable. A parable is an annoying story that follows us around all day, like a tune stuck in our head.

A man had two sons. He said the first "Go, work in the family business today." The son said "Not me. I've got better things to do." He leaves. Perhaps he is the prodigal son that we hear about in Luke's gospel. He takes his father's money and he wastes it in riotous living. But then he comes to himself. He wakes up. He admits that he is powerless over the things that are ruining his life. He calls on his higher power to help him. "I have sinned against my father and my God." He turns around, which is the basic meaning of repentance. He turns around and he enters the family business.

Or maybe this first son who says no is the Samaritan that we hear about. Samaritans are suspicious people. They are half breeds, they are half orthodox. They are really not reliable. But in the story, while good, religious folk all found reasons not to help the guy lying in the ditch, the Samaritan, we might call him the Good Samaritan, changes his plans, turns from his path (which is the meaning of repent) and helps the man in need. He loved his neighbor as himself.

Now there is a second son in this parable. The father says "Go, work in the vineyard," and the second son says "Hallelujah. Amen. Right on. Yes. I am with you, father. See, I am wearing a "yes" bracelet, and I have a big "yes" on the bumper of my car. I know all the words to the "Yes" hymn.

But then this son leaves, and does not go about his father's business. He is way too wrapped up in himself, in looking good, in giving the appearance of piety to actually do anything for someone else. They are never quite good enough for him to help. He claims he wants to help the "deserving poor", but he never actually meets any deserving enough. He claims he is ready to share what God has given him, but he keeps on keeping it for his own rainy day. He hums the "yes" hymn to himself, while he goes about all his own business.

"Which one did the will of his father?" asks Jesus? Which one finally got on the road to God's kingdom, recognizing God's authority over his life? Which one finally acted on the father's two commands, entering the family business of loving God and our neighbors as his primary duty?

Jesus says all kinds of people have repented of their road they were on and turned toward him; they are entering the kingdom right now; the kingdom is any place where folk love God and their neighbors right now. Where there is amazing equality and sharing; where there is forgiveness 70x7 for us and for other. All kinds of strange folk are recognizing the authority of Jesus. They are become doers of his word and not hearers only; they are in the game, not merely spectators.

So now the parable is told to us. And where do we find ourselves in this story?

I know we have folk who give their time to read to other people's children at George Mason Elementary school. That is surely God's vineyard. I know we have folk who go to Haiti or Nicaragua to install clean water systems. They have said yes and then done it.

But what about more day to day choices? We say we are people of prayer. Do we stop each day to thank God, to offer up our concerns, to listen? Do we pray with our children so that they may learn how to trust God? Christianity does not happen by osmosis. It does not just drip out of us here and there. We make choices with our time, and others see those choices.

We say that we are people of the Book; that the Bible matters to us. Do we actually open it? Read it? Do we join with others in a small group setting so that the Word may find a place in our lives? If not then we are the child who says “yes” but does not do anything about it.

Jesus is not looking for admirers, or “yes men” or cheer eaders. He is looking for followers; disciples, doers of the word and not hearers only. He is looking for those willing and interested in how to do the will of God here and now. And we are just the kind of people to say “yes” and mean it. We have done so before, and we can do so again.

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For reflection:

Write down one action that you are willing to take this week to recognize the authority of Jesus in your life> One deed you will complete to show Jesus and yourself who is Lord.