

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season September 27, 2020 – 17th Sunday after Pentecost

We continue in the 'green' season of Pentecost, following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve's message for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost. Our next outside service will be October 11.

Lessons for Pentecost 17

Psalm 25, Phil. 2:1-13, Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him.

Jesus is now in Jerusalem, the home of the temple, the home of the chief priests. We get to see the chief priests in action. Jesus has alluded to them twice – in conversations with the disciples, in which he told them of his fate: *He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.* So, the disciples have been prepared, we, the reader have been prepared for their reentry into Jesus' story. I say reentry, because we heard about the chief priests way back in chapter 2 of Matthew's Gospel. When Jewish King Herod, troubled by the Magi's question: "Where is the one born King of the Jews?", consults the chief priests. They consult their authority, the scriptures, and tell Herod the new king will be born in Bethlehem. We, the readers of the Gospel, may remember their words, but they do not seem to remember, and they make no connection between the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem, the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem and their words about the arrival of a baby in Bethlehem.

Today the chief priests and elders confront Jesus in the temple – where he has set up shop to teach the people. "*By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?*" The chief priests are really fired up. We need to go back a few verses in Matthew to understand more fully. I mentioned that Jesus is in Jerusalem – yes, he just made his triumphant entry into town. The accolades of the crowd and their shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David" had made the chief priests indignant. But Jesus was not through – he not only entered town, he entered the temple where he drove out the buyers and sellers, where he overturned the tables of the money changers and those selling doves for sacrifices. Yes, Jesus had made quite a scene – overturning not just tables but the whole commercialized system that supported the temple sacrifice system.

Jesus is now back in the temple – he may be quietly teaching, but his presence is disquieting and upsetting to the chief priests – the temple authorities. They understand that their authority has been severely challenged by Jesus. He must be confronted. The people must see him put back in his place. "*By what authority are you doing these things?*" They must have missed it in the flurry of the temple clearing, but Jesus did cite scripture as he overturned those tables: "*It is written: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer.' But you are making it a den of robbers.*" These words of authority from scripture did not so much justify Jesus' actions as they challenged the authority of the chief priests criticizing their care of the temple, which was to be a house of prayer.

The chief priests will not be daunted by Jesus' scripture quoting, they have their question and they will have it answered publicly: "*By what authority are you doing these things?*" Ah, the chief priests are about to learn that asking Jesus a question can backfire. They are about to learn how Jesus, time and again, will answer a question with a question of his own. Sure enough, he asks them to weigh in on John's Baptism – *by what authority did John baptize?* John was another trouble maker. He baptized far away from the seat of religious authority – out in the

wilderness. His baptism was a call to repentance. This was a problem – John had, in many ways, flaunted their authority, but John had in many ways endeared himself to the people. How should, how could they answer Jesus’ question? It was no longer a theological question for them, it was a stay-in-power, stay-in-favor question for them. They would not answer the question; they could only muster a “We do not know.” Jesus, by his question, has deflected the chief priests’ question and shown the people, how the ones who are supposed to be in authority, cannot exercise authority. Yes, these are supposed to be the elders of the people, the leaders. They do not have the courage to lead.

Perhaps to give the chief priests a chance to breathe after this failed challenge, Jesus offers up a brief parable – a father had two sons ...” This is quite an opening. A father and two sons, how many stories does this bring to mind? Adam with Cain and Abel, Isaac with Jacob and Esau, a father with a stay-at-home and a prodigal son. With all that in our heads, we hear Jesus lay out a simple parable of a father and two sons. A simple message about the difference between saying what is right and doing what is right. What is Jesus saying about authority? The father’s authority is attacked in two ways in the short parable – one son says, “I will” but does not do what his father asked. One son, says, in defiance to his father, “I will not.” He eventually does what the father asks -ultimately respecting and responding to the father’s authority. Jesus suggests that ‘actions speak louder than words’. As I told the kids in the children’s message, I preferred it when my son stepped up to my authority on both levels -saying, “yes, I will” and then doing what I asked.

But Jesus has more in mind with this story of a father and two sons. He will drive his point home about responding to – recognizing – the authority of God. God who inspired the scriptures, God who sent John to offer God’s way of repentance and righteousness. God’s way, Jesus says, that was embraced by prostitutes and tax collectors. God’s way that made a way for these who were despised and shunned by the temple crowd. God’s authority defies our human rules, God’s authority defies the human tendency to create boundaries and outsiders, God’s authority is not under the control of chief priests and elders. They also need to get in that repentance line and understand the message of John, and now, the message of Jesus.

What a public put down! Of course, we know that the chief priests will have another day in Jesus’ life – actually death. They will reemerge in Matthew 26 to plot and scheme to take Jesus' life. They will use what little authority they actually have to set in motion the arrest that will get Jesus before Pilate who had the authority to take Jesus down (or so he thought).

Now, this would be a time in the sermon for the pastor to go on and speak about authority in our days. There is plenty of fodder for our discussion. By what authority does that person speak about COVID 19? By what authority does that person speak about racism? white supremacy? white privilege? By what authority does that person speak about police brutality? about violence against police? By what authority does that person speak about climate change? global warming? By what authority does that person speak about opening up our schools?

In our present day, many cynical answers emerge to the “By what authority question.” By the authority of **my** expert. By the authority of **my** cable news station. By the authority of the latest posting on Facebook that I am sure was not from Russia. By the authority of the latest Tweet. By the authority of ‘*my side has the votes*’. These are times that lead to cynicism – great cynicism and frustration and despair.

We will be having a special prayer service available on Election Eve – November 2. We will pause and pray – we will confess, we will lament, we will hear scripture and music, we will ask God for guidance and encouragement for all in authority. We will pray for all who will be

elected, all who will not be elected, all of us no matter how we vote. We will pray that as a nation we will move into the way of righteousness, that includes having a spirit of repentance. We will pray that our words and our deeds reflect the righteousness of God.

Jesus was questioned today – “*By what authority do you do these things.*” Jesus was no wallflower. He was out in the public square; he was at the heart of what the Jewish people considered sacred. He acted with authority, citing scripture – he did not shy away from doing what is right. But Jesus had other ‘things’ in mind when he was asked, ‘by what authority he did these things’. *These things* included his coming into Jerusalem to die on the Cross. As Jesus had told John when he submitted to John’s Baptism, “this is the way to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus’s authority is God’s righteousness, which includes making a way, via his Cross, for all to turn to God – tax collectors and prostitutes, sons **and daughters** of God, who continue to say, “No” to God, who continue to say, “Yes” and not follow through with what God has asked. Yes, we are the daughters and sons of that parable, who lose our way. We are the chief priests and elders who get caught up in questions of our own human making about authority. Yes, we are the ones who can quickly lose sight of God and think of our own needs for power and recognition and reputation. Jesus came for all of us, as the chief priests had determined long before in scripture: *for out of Bethlehem will come forth a ruler who will shepherd my people.* Thank you Jesus that you went to Jerusalem, to the Cross, to assert God’s authority of mercy and grace.

I close with Paul’s words that describe the unique authority of Jesus that we see in the Cross:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

AMEN