



**WHO'S THE AUTHORITY?
THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
SEPTEMBER 27, 2020
MATTHEW 21: 23-32**

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"

Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?"

They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."

So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."

Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

"'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

"Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

SERMON



Perhaps the most popular preacher in America, Joel Osteen, opens his worship service by holding up a bible and asking us to recite the following: “this is my bible. I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do.”

This is an example of encouraging trust in an external authority. In this case, the bible. Or maybe, Joel Osteen.

Others of us might value the pope, our bishop or pastor as our external authority. Since the reformation, protestants rejected the pope and have most often looked to the bible as the external authority.

In the first half of life, we do need external authorities—parents, teachers, role models, and mentors upon whom we rely for guidance, support, and wisdom.

Hand-in-hand with this reliance on external authority comes the perspective that God is also an external authority. We imagine God out there or up there somewhere. Even the phrase “higher power” might lead us to look heavenward when thinking about God.

Eventually, though, to become spiritually mature, we must make the move into trusting our own internal authority.

What makes this difficult is that the church often sends us the message that we are not to trust our own experience.

We are too sinful. Or Satan will mislead us. Or we just cannot trust our own ability to know the truth. No, the truth must come from outside our own experience in the form of that external authority.

Think of that old children’s sermon where the pastor says, “I’m going to describe one of God’s creatures and I want you to guess what it is.

It’s gray with a big tail. Builds its nest high in the trees and stores nuts for the winter.”

One kid responds, “I know the answer is supposed to be Jesus, but it sure does sound like a squirrel.”

There it is. External authority gives us the right answer and that’s supposed to work in our spiritual life.

But it doesn’t.



To look toward an external authority means to give up our autonomy to come to our own conclusions or to allow our life experience to teach us what we need to know.

This means that instead of right belief, we want to move to right practice.

Whether or not I believe Mary was a virgin might not be as important as what am I to do about the hungry in our community?

Think of Jesus as the one we are to follow, rather than worship.

For example, Jesus quotes external authority, “you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘you shall not murder.’”

But then Jesus moves into his own inner authority, “but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.”

Right practice.

Yes, we take in perceived truth from our environment, which includes the bible, theologians, pastors, teachers, tradition, and our own life experience. All of this must eventually be integrated into our own personal perspective. This becomes the solid ground upon which we stand. Our hard-fought wisdom. Our lessons learned by attending the school of hard knocks. Testing external authority to see if it rings true with our own experience.

James hillman points out that just because some authority wants us to do something, that we have the skill to do it, and that we will be well paid to do it is not good enough. Because this is the definition of a mafia hitman. The most important question is “is this something I want to do?” Or “does this action express who I am?”

This is inner authority.

I know because I know.

Life has led me to my own perspective.

I can recognize truth when I hear it.

I see the logic or illogic in what is presented to me

Or like Luther: “here I stand, I can do no other.”

In many cases, prayer has been reduced to something functional that we do. Instead, think of prayer as an invitation to your own inner experience of God: we are to go to our inner room and know ourselves in the presence of God. In this way, we attain our own inner authority....



This morning, our gospel presents a complex series of three scenarios concerning authority.

In the first, Jesus is challenged by the top-notch religious leaders about his own authority.

Jesus, ever the wise spiritual teacher, responds by tossing the ball back into their court. The end result is that they refuse to answer a question that would reveal their inner perspective. They shrink back from revealing what they really think. Both out of fear of Jesus and fear of the people around them.

So, Jesus tells them the story about two sons who are asked to go to work by their father.

One says he won't go and then does. The other says he will but doesn't.

"Which one did the will of the father?" asks Jesus.

Here the chief priests reveal that they believe that the son who said no but went to work did the will of his father.

And those who rely on external authority get it wrong.

What is the correct answer?

The son who said yes and then didn't go to work?

Wrong again.

Let me answer out of my own inner process. Because scripture doesn't tell us the right answer. Here, Jesus is akin to a Zen master who wants our ego to short-circuit so "the answer" arises within us from a deeper inner resource.

Having lived with this text for decades, I've come to the inner conclusion that the answer is neither.

Inner authority has integrity and integrity is when our words match our actions. This is not the case with either son. They are divided within themselves. They have not reached the point in their development where they have integrity and inner authority....

Now let's be careful here and wrongly conclude that Jesus is all about us giving the right answers.



Jesus is angry because these chief priests and their organized religion clearly have not led to inner wisdom and trusted personal experience. They remain poor spiritual guides. Elsewhere, Jesus uses a metaphor castigating them as hypocrites who clean the outside of the cup but leave the inside of the cup filthy. The religious leaders of the day have fine clothing, lofty titles, and their ego-driven belief that they are pure under religious law. That is, they are self-righteous. But reveal that they have not developed inner spiritual authority.

Jesus then blasts them with such an incredible statement, “the tax collectors and whores are streaming into the kingdom of heaven before you.”

What’s interesting to me is that I cannot find theologians and biblical scholars who have a lot to say about this statement from Jesus. It’s as if we don’t want to touch this because it so goes against the image we have constructed of Jesus. This is no mild-mannered nice guy. Yet here, we see that Jesus can be direct, to the point, and not particularly interested in making sure he doesn’t hurt someone.

Aside from being marginalized by proper society, tax collectors and whores cannot hide their identity. Tax collectors were renown for cheating people when they paid their taxes as well as being employees of the hated roman empire.

And whores transgress countless religious laws in the day around sexual expression.

We are yet so moralistic when it comes to sexual matters.

Heck, shouldn’t Jesus be praising those who wear purity rings and those who refrain from pre-marital sex. Shouldn’t Jesus be railing against gays, lesbians, transgendered folk and those who call themselves non-binary?

Who is this guy, Jesus?

The tax collectors and whores heard and accepted John’s the baptizer’s message to be transformed. The tax collectors and sinners recognized their brokenness, their spiritual blindness, their need to be transformed.

But the chief priests heard John and Jesus and said, “no, we’re okay. We can see clearly. It’s those other people who need help.

Which leads Jesus to elsewhere to name self-righteousness as the unforgivable sin.



If we think we're okay, we are not.

If we think we can see, we are blind.

If we think we are acceptable, we are not.

If we think you got it together, we don't.

If we think we're better than those sinful people, we are lost.

I love the lyric by Leonard Cohen, "there's a crack in everything, but that's how the light gets in."

But if we think there is no crack in us, how can the light get in?

Or, as in our second song this morning, "somebody wake me, shake me, don't let me sleep too long. Tryin' to make it in due time, before the heaven doors close."

If we think we are awake to Christ's teaching, we are still sleeping....

Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman killed in Auschwitz, wrote before her death, "there doesn't seem to be much you yourself (meaning God) can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last."

So, there it is. Etty is showing us that the move to our own inner authority includes experiencing God as a living presence within. As Paul says, "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."

Or as Jung wrote, "the experience of God is a defeat for the ego."

The call of God is for each of us to become fully our true self and to be true to our self. To follow Jesus is being as faithful to our own path in life as Jesus was to his. Even when our path leads to suffering, as did the path for Jesus.

In the brokenness of our inner authority, may we find our way to be streaming into the kingdom of God.

SERMON SONG



Three Wooden Crosses (Randy Travis)