

Matthew 21:23-32

Pentecost 17 + Proper 21A + October 4, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Way of Righteousness

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 21:32: "For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

"By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" When Jesus enters the temple, that's the question He gets from the elders and chief priests. It's a trap question, and they know it. They're less than pleased: yesterday, this Jesus came riding into Jerusalem as the crowds shouted "Hosanna!" and "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" After His triumphal entry, He went to the temple and drove out the money-changers, causing a ruckus and disrupting the business.

Now, one day later, this Jesus has the nerve to return to the temple and start teaching the people. He's acting like the place belongs to Him. Him! A poor rabbi from backwoods Nazareth, not a priest or an elder or a Sadducee. It's time to set things straight and put Him in His place: "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"

No matter the answer, they plan to capitalize. If He says that His authority comes from God, they'll accuse Him of blasphemy. If He says that He's authorized Himself, they'll do the same. If He claims some other human authority, well, who could possibly overrule the chief priests on what one may do and say at the temple?

So they ask the question, and they await to pounce on the answer.

One of the delightful things about Jesus, however, is that He never lets His enemies control the conversation. He often responds to a question with a question of His own, which is exactly what He does here: "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell Me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" Or, if we want to rephrase it, Jesus is asking, "By whose authority did John the Baptist baptize?"

The tables are turned. If they say that God gave John the authority, then the next question is obvious: "Why didn't you believe him? Why didn't you believe the prophet sent from God? Why didn't you believe him when he pointed straight at Jesus and said, 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world?'" But if they say that John wasn't sent from God, they'll lose the crowd who believe that John was a prophet, one who was martyred for speaking tough truth to Herod. No matter what they say, they lose. There's a reason why it's a no-win situation: the truth is not on their side. The truth exonerates Jesus as the Messiah sent from God; but because they do not believe in Him, that's the last thing they want to acknowledge. So they give the answer they deem the safest, which everybody knows is also the lamest: "We do not know."

So Jesus responds, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." They know the truth and they just don't want to say it.

Jesus will eventually answer their question, but His time to do so has not yet come. It will, and soon. In just a few days, He will be nailed to a cross for the sins of the world. On the third day after, He'll rise again, victorious over the grave. Before He ascends into heaven, He'll answer their question for His disciples. He'll say, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

So, you know: Jesus is given all authority by His Father in heaven. He's been demonstrating this all along. He's shown His authority over every sort of disease and affliction. He's shown His authority over evil spirits, sending them away with just a word. He's shown His authority to teach beyond the Old Testament, adding to the Word of God because He *is* the Word made flesh. He's shown His authority to cleanse the temple, His Father's house, while the chief priests huff and puff and can't do anything to stop Him. On the upcoming Friday, He'll declare from the cross that He is authorized by His Father to bear the sin of world, to be forsaken in the place of mankind so that all who believe in Him might be forgiven. On the third day, He'll show His authority over death and grave as He rises again, body and all.

Risen again, He delegates to His disciples before He ascends into heaven. He gives them authority, His authority. To do what? To make disciples by baptizing and teaching. To forgive sins.

If you think that's a letdown from Jesus' work of healing diseases and casting out demons, let's get back to the Gospel lesson, where Jesus tells the parable of the two sons. Then He tells them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him."

John came in the way of righteousness, speaking the Word and preparing the way for the Lord. The elders and the chief priests rejected him and did not believe; but tax collectors and prostitutes did believe: they believed in Jesus and were forgiven. Don't miss the fact that when Jesus' authority is questioned here, He makes clear why He has come and what He is given authority to do: most of all, it is to bestow faith and forgiveness.

Keep this in mind: whatever Jesus is doing, He is always about the forgiveness of sins.

That's the authority He gives to His Church even today: we are called upon to baptize, to proclaim the Gospel, to celebrate the Lord's Supper because that is how the Lord forgives sins, how He makes and strengthens disciples. And if your sins are forgiven, the devil has no power over you. If you're forgiven, the grave can't hold onto you. If you're forgiven for your sins, the ultimate healing is yours when you are raised up on the Last Day.

Do you see? Everything that Jesus had authority to do during His ministry on earth, He still has authority to do, for you, today.

Except that you don't see. You believe. You walk by faith, not by sight. You hear that Jesus has conquered death, even though you still face your mortality. You hear in the absolution that *God* no longer remembers your sins, even though *you* can't forget them. You hear that you'll be raised up perfectly healed on the Last Day, but you're not there yet. Right? You're walking in the way of righteousness, but you walk by faith. By the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, you believe in what you have not yet seen; and, says Jesus, blessed are you for it.

Blessed are you for believing what you do not see, and blessed are you for believing in spite of what you do see. You see a dark, ugly and dying world; and this week, it is given to you to see the devastation wreaked by one tormented man upon a crowd in Las Vegas. The violence is horrific, a gut punch, and the devil would have you believe that it's a sure sign that Jesus is powerless, that He has no authority to prevent such things. And if that is the case, your faith is in vain.

Many, I fear, will be tempted to forsake the Lord and blame Him for the work of evil. But you know better, because you know about Jesus, His authority, and how He saves by way of the cross. You know that the evil worked by man does not disprove His authority: it only confirms what the Bible says about the evil of man, and how one who is unrestrained in his unholiness can do terrible damage. You know that the wages of sin is death, that death comes to all, sometimes quietly, sometimes violently. When Pilate slaughtered innocents at the altar, or when the tower at Siloam fell and crushed passersby, Jesus had this to say: "Do you think [the victims] were worse sinners? ... No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). Lest we think that He is being brusque and uncaring, please hear Him carefully: because all perish because of sin, He bids you to repent, so that you might be forgiven – so that, no matter when or how death comes, you might have eternal life in Him who has already died and is risen forever.

This you know: The way of righteousness goes through the valley of the shadow of death, because that is the way Christ has gone for you. For some of God's people, that valley was an outside concert venue last Sunday evening: but the Lord is always faithful, and they now stand in glory while we still wait to see what they behold. They died in the faith in which you live, that Christ has died your death already, and now He uses death – that conquered enemy – to deliver you to everlasting life, fully healed and fully delivered from all evil. In the meantime, rejoice that you are baptized, for the Lord has made you His beloved child. Hear His Word as He cleanses and enlivens you. Eat His body and drink His blood, for there you partake of His resurrection and look forward to your own. You are in dark times, but by the grace of God you are on the way of righteousness. By the authority of Jesus, the final authority, heaven is yours; because by the authority of Jesus, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen