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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21A)

September 28, 2014

Text: Matthew 21:23–27

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

If someone came running into our morning worship service and starting overturning pews, tipped over the baptismal font, the lectern, the candles, and summarily tossed me out on my head, while yelling, “My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robber” (Matt 21:13), we’d be a bit shocked and ticked off. We’d certainly call in the authorities. Among the many questions, we’d certainly ask “Why did you do this? Who gave you the right to come in here and make such a raucous?”

That’s exactly how the chief priests and elders of the people were feeling. Jesus did exactly the things I just described. After entering into Jerusalem, Jesus makes a beeline for the Temple and all pandemonium breaks loose. Jesus overturns the tables where people are buying animals for sacrifice and kicks out the clerks collecting the money. Jesus looked more like a wild-eyed terrorist than the Savior of the world.

And then, as if He owned the place, the Lord settles in and begins healing the blind and the lame. And He teaches about God’s kingdom. That’s the job of the scribes and priests. Who does this guy think He is? Where does He get off doing these things?

Everything I just described provides the context, the situation and setting, for today’s Gospel reading from Matthew 21:23–27. The day after Jesus overthrew the moneychangers’ table, He returns back to the Temple. You gotta give Jesus some credit for His moxie. He returns back to the place where He created such mayhem and acts as if nothing happened, as if He owned the place, and it was the most natural and normal thing in the world for Him to be teaching and preaching. He did call it “my Father’s house.”

You can well imagine the chief priests and elders of the people are bristling from head to toe when they confront Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (vs. 23). Regardless of their motivation for asking the question, we must concede that it’s a good question needing to be answered. Jesus had

been teaching, preaching, and performing miracles for over 3 years but the time we get to Matthew 21. He had a significant following. Even the political leaders were keeping an eye on Jesus.

When we ask questions of authority, we typically are thinking in terms of power. But power and authority aren't the same things. Authority is permission to do something legitimately. Power, by contrast, is simply the ability to do something. For example, I have the power and ability to drive my car 120 mph down I-80. But I do not have the authority to do that. I have the authority to drive 75 mph. A million different examples could be given.

One that comes up from time to time is the absolution I pronounce at the beginning of every worship service. Some Christians respond to me saying, "I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" with confusion or even anger. Who does he think he is to forgive my sin? Only God can do that. And they're correct about only God being able to forgive sins. What they aren't considering is by whose authority I speak. "As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by His authority..." Christ has authorized, given permission, for pastors to speak the forgiveness only He has the power to give.

No just anyone should be allowed to preach from this pulpit. And you should always guard your pulpit in order to make sure that God's Word is being proclaimed in its truth and purity. Make sure your kids are being catechized by someone authorized to do so and who can do so in truth and integrity.

Some Johnny off the street does not have the authority to preside over the celebration of the Lord Supper. The same is true in the other direction. Not just anyone gets to receive the Lord's Supper. We wouldn't allow a Muslim or Mormon or a known atheist to receive the body and blood of Jesus. Why? They haven't been authorized to do so by the Scriptures which teach that one must be taught the Christian faith, who must publicly confess the same faith of those with whom they receive the Lord's Supper, and who have expressed a desire to participate in the worship life of God's people in a congregational setting. Closed communion is really a question of authority. Who has the authority to give and receive the gifts Jesus wants to give to people?

So the chief priests and scribes are right to ask Jesus by what authority He's doing all these things. But the Lord knows their hearts as well. And so He answers their

question with His own question. It's a beautiful and powerful teaching technique though the student doesn't always appreciate it. At any rate, Jesus asks a question in vs. 24–25, "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?" It's a brilliant question that leaves the chief priest and elders with no wiggle room, no possibility of neutrality. And they immediately realize their dilemma.

Look back at vs. 25, "And they discussed it among themselves saying, 'If we say, From heaven, he will say to us, Why then did you not believe him? But if we say, From man, we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.'" If they answer "from heaven" they are exposing their own unbelief. For John the Baptist claimed authority from God to preach about the coming of the Messiah and to baptize all those prepared for the way of salvation. John preached that Jesus was the Lamb of God, the Messiah, who takes away the sins of the world. To believe John's message meant believing in Jesus. But the chief priest and scribes don't believe John's message and they certainly reject Jesus as being the Savior.

But they're shrewd politicians too. They realize that the people believe John was a prophet. To speak against John would be to inflame the irritation and anger of the people. They don't want that because their positions of authority rest, at least in part, on the goodwill of the masses.

So they do the political thing that frustrated people in the ancient world as much as it does today. They try to side-step the question. "We do not know" (vs. 27). Let's consider how cowardly this answer is. The chief priests and scribes are the religious experts of the day. And yet they can't make and give an evaluation of a religious event like John's baptism? It wasn't like they didn't know about John or didn't have time to think and evaluate what John preached and did. John died 2-3 years earlier, plenty of time to ponder and consider if he was from God or a charlatan.

Well two can play at that game. Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (vs. 27). Don't expect me to give an answer on the legitimacy of my religious teachings and actions when you can't give one on John the Baptist. If you can't give a correct evaluation of him, you won't get it right with Me either. And I'm not going to be a pawn in your little game.

But Jesus does answer the question of authority just a few days later. What gives Him the authority to do everything He did: cleanse the Temple, heal the sick, raise the dead, proclaim the coming of God's kingdom, call men and women to faith and discipleship, etc. To be sure, Jesus is the Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity. But that doesn't provide the answer to the question. Jesus' authority is revealed in His death and resurrection. That's what authorizes Him to be the Savior. Because He is crucified and resurrected, He can give forgiveness to whomever He chooses. And He proclaims that He has borne the sins of all people, every man, woman, and child.

And because He's the crucified and resurrected Lord, He has authority to send His church out into the world to baptize, preach, and teach. The importance of Jesus being authorized by His death and resurrection can't be overstated. It is not without reason that Jesus uses the language of authority in giving the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20, “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore (notice that!) 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.’”

How can you claim to be a Christian? Jesus declares it to be so. How do you know your baptism is good and valid? Because of the Church's authority? Not really. Christ's authority stands behind your baptism. You are a forgiven, justified, redeemed Christian, a saint of God in every respect, because Jesus says you are. And He's the resurrected Lord. His victory is your victory, His life your life. He has the authority to give it. He gives it to you, now and forever.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.