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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 21, Series A (Pentecost 17)
Saturday, September 26th, 2020
Sunday, September 27th, 2020

Sermon: The “Right” Stuff: John and Jesus [**Short version**]

Text: Matthew 21:23-27

Focus: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus.

Function: That they would rejoice in and submit to Christ’s gracious authority in their lives.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: “That I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom...” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. “Just who do you think you are?!” “What gives you a right to *say* that?” “Did anybody authorize your actions?” Questions of authority have been brought to the fore during the past year of the Trump administration. Many on the right and left have questioned the way that he runs the State Department, Justice, and Homeland Security, especially when it comes to his hiring and firing decisions, as well as executive orders. We’re not here to settle those questions or judge the president one way or the other. What’s noteworthy for us is that whenever a leader breaks with precedent or walks the thin red line between explicit and implicit powers in the Constitution, he or she is bound to draw attention and criticism. What gives them the right? Who do they think they are?

Questions of authority abound also in the Church. Is this a matter for the elders or the Council? What kinds of decisions may the staff make without congregational approval? Who has a right to preach publicly and administer the Sacraments: only the ordained guy, or any layman in the congregation? Does a pastor need to be seminary-trained, or is the “inner call” enough? Consider confession and absolution: who gives the pastor the right to forgive other

people's sins? Isn't that something only God can do? Who should be "allowed" to receive Holy Communion at our church, and who makes the call? Does the Synod President or District President have a right to tell an individual congregation or pastor how to conduct their ministry?

The matter of authority is what drives the plot in our Gospel reading today. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ask the chief priests and Jewish elders (Matt. 21:23 ESV).¹ In other words: Jesus, what gives you the right?!

On the Tuesday of Holy Week, just two days after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, Jesus is teaching in the Temple. It is the same Temple in which—just the day prior—he overturned the tables and drove out the money changers, declaring, "My house shall be called a house of prayer" (21:13). The Jewish religious leaders were jealous of Jesus' influence and popularity (27:18). They also feared that a popular uprising might try to make Jesus king, which would only result in bloodshed and the Romans taking away their power and position (John 11:47-52).²

So they come to Jesus and question his credentials. Who authorized him? Who said he could teach in the temple and overturn the tables? What gave him the right?

It was a fair question. Even in the First Century A.D., rabbis needed to be authorized in order to teach publicly.³ But Jesus was unschooled. He had not studied under any famous rabbi. He was not ordained by the Sanhedrin. So who gave him authority to teach? What gave him the right?

So Jesus turns the tables on them (once again!) with a question of his own: "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

² For what it is worth, a crowd did try to make Jesus a king by force after the miracle of the miraculous feeding (cf. John 6:15).

³ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 737.

do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?”
(Matt. 21:24-25).

Jesus’ question is a trap, a Catch 22, and the Jewish religious authorities know it. If they say that John’s ministry came from God, then they would be caught in their own words, because John was the forerunner of Jesus. John the Baptist made this abundantly clear when he pointed at Jesus and told his disciples, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Later, when John’s disciples told him that more and more people were following Jesus, John was actually pleased. “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). So if the Jewish authorities say that John was a prophet sent from God, they will be forced to acknowledge, then, that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God. But they hate Jesus so much, they cannot bring themselves to it.

On the other hand, if they say that John was just an upstart, a crackpot desert prophet who spent too much time in the sun, then the people would turn on them. For prior to his death, John had been a popular and influential preacher. The crowds believed “that John was a prophet” (v. 26). Quite notably, on Palm Sunday, the crowds said the same thing about Jesus (Matt. 21:11; cf. v. 46). We all know how quickly the mindless mob can turn on someone. (Later that week, the same crowds that hailed Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem with *hosannas* would cry out for his crucifixion). The Sadducees and Pharisees had good reason to fear the crowd.

So where did John the Baptist’s ministry of preaching and baptizing come from? Was he authorized by God or by human powers? What gave *him* the right?

No matter what they answer, they’re damned if they do and damned if they don’t. They pretty much are just damned because they don’t believe in Jesus and his Word. (*Aside: Why*

were they called the Sadducees? Because they didn't believe in Jesus, so they were sad, you see.)

Flabbergasted and outmaneuvered, the Jewish leaders begrudgingly reply, "We do not know" (Matt. 21:27).

To which Jesus says, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (v. 27).

Except that he already has told them. Remember: John ordained Jesus. So by appealing to the authority of John the Baptist's ministry, Jesus lays out his own credentials. John was called by God to be a prophet. John passed the torch to Jesus (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). Who gave Jesus the authority to teach? John the Baptist. Who gave John the authority to preach? God. [*Slowly*] Ergo, therefore, why and wherefore, Jesus' authority ultimately comes *from God!* [*Pause for silence.*]

That did not sit well with the Jewish religious leaders. Even when they saw it, they did not afterwards change their minds and believe it (cf. 21:32). Before the week was out, they would arrange for Jesus to be killed like a criminal on a cross. *They* did not have the authority to issue execution orders. So they had to turn to the very Romans they detested in order to carry out a sentence upon the Christ.

But on the third day, Jesus rose again from the dead. He confounded his enemies. God vindicated him by the resurrection. From the cross and empty tomb, Jesus forgave your sins and gives you eternal life.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples "*All authority* in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18). *All* authority belongs to Jesus. He teaches with divine authority (Matt. 7:29). He has the authority to forgive sins (9:6). He has authority over the devils (10:1). And he has the authority to lay down his life and take it up again (John 10:18).

Who does Jesus think he is? The Son of God. Who gives him the right? God. Who authorized him? The heavenly Father. God gave Jesus all the right stuff.

Jesus exercises his authority *for you*. He does not lord it over us like the leaders of the nations, who are themselves established and ordained by God (Rom. 13:1-10). Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, drive out demons, and grant eternal life. And so he does.

And then he turns right around and gives that same authority to his Church:

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (**John 20:21-23**).

“And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction” (**Matt. 10:1**).

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘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’” (**Matt. 28:18-20**).

All authority is given to Jesus. Alleluia! Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.