

Sermon – Bethlehem Lutheran, Kalispell MT
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Pentecost 16
Matthew 21.23-32

Grace and peace . . .

Who do you think you are?!

What right do you think you have to do what you just did?!

That's the keepers of the system talking –
the chief priests and the elders,
the ones who are in charge of the temple system,
the guardians of the powers that be.
Here is Jesus, teaching in the temple courts.
The keepers of the system suddenly converge on him,
interrupt his teaching:

Who do you think you are?!

Oh, I know:

In Scripture it sounds a whole lot more polite,
genteel, appropriate, and sophisticated:

By what authority are you doing these things?

And who gave you this authority?¹

But this is no neutral, detached, academic question!

Two days ago, Jesus cooked up a parade as he entered Jerusalem.

He rode in on a donkey:

A calculated move to fulfill prophecy,
a not-so-subtle way to claim that he was the king.

And that's how the crowds read it:

They hailed him with excited *Hosannas*.

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!

Down with Rome! Yay for us!

That was two days ago.

Yesterday, Jesus calmly walked into the temple courts

¹ Matthew 21.23

and suddenly began trashing everything:

He overturned tables,

drove out the sheep and goats,

scattered the money-changers' coins all over the pavement –

Jesus cleaned house!

This is not what my Father's house is for! he yelled.

My Father's house is to be a house of prayer for all nations.

You have turned it into a hive of bandits!

That was yesterday.

Today is Day Three.

What will today bring?

What is this Wild Card Jesus going to pull off today?

You are the keepers of the temple.

What are you going to do about this Loose Cannon?

Time is of the essence.

You can't let this go on any longer.

Today is the day to act.

And so you approach Jesus in the temple courts.

He's busy teaching. That's good:

No wild theatrics today – at least not yet.

You don't go alone, of course.

You go as a group.

You present a solid, united front.

And you do it in as polite and adult a manner as you can muster:

Excuse us, rabbi, but we need to ask you:

By what authority are you doing these things?

The politeness is only a screen.

Jesus knows what they really mean.

The crowds know what they really mean:

Who do you think you are?!

What right do you think you have to do what you've been doing?

Who authorized you to carry out these theatrics?

It's not the first time Jesus has been asked such a question.

Some time back, way up north in Galilee,

Jesus was just getting off the boat onto shore,
and a different group of religious leaders was there waiting for him:

They too were upset about what Jesus had been doing.

What right do you have, Jesus?

Prove yourself!

Show us a sign from heaven.

No, says Jesus.

No sign for you.

No proof.

And he climbs right back into the boat
and off they sail to the other side of the lake.²

A little harsh?

Not very sensitive or patient on Jesus' part?

But here's the deal:

Jesus shows amazing sensitivity and patience
whenever a person is genuinely seeking and struggling.

But these religious leaders?

There's no honest seeking going on here.

This is: *My mind's made up. Don't confuse me with the facts.*

Even more, this is:

Who do you think you are?

We're in charge here.

We've got things well in hand.

We know how it all works.

Who are you to go mucking around in our front yard?

For them, no honest conversation.

No genuine searching. No real inquiry.

For them, Jesus doesn't waste his breath:

No sign for you.

No proof.

So here we are at headquarters – right in the heart of the temple courts –
and the keepers of the system are nervous and outraged:

By what authority are you doing these things?

Who do you think you are?!

Who authorized you to carry out these theatrics?

² Mark 8.11-13

So Jesus plays a little game.
He turns the tables.

Well, he says, let me ask you a question.

You answer my question, and I'll answer yours:

[Amazingly, they go along with it!

He's got them hooked before they know it.]

Here's my question, he says:

Not long ago, John the Baptist was on the scene baptizing people.

Where did his baptism come from?

Was it from God?

Or did John just make it up?³

What the keepers of the system don't seem to recognize
is that Jesus' question and their question – they're the same question.

The question is:

Do you recognize the hand of God?

Do you recognize the voice of God?

How *do you recognize God at work?*

Their answer to Jesus' question will in fact answer
their question about Jesus!

Authority.

Now there's a thorny issue!

We have something of a love/hate relationship with authority, don't we?

It's true for us as human beings.

It's maybe even more problematic for us as Americans,
especially 21st-century Americans

who finally don't want to recognize any real authority
outside of our own selves:

Don't tread on me!

On the one hand, we want it all our own way.

On the other hand, we watch our world

and we lament the breakdown of authority.

Authority is an issue in the church – big time!

³ Matt 21.24-25a

Some of our biggest divisions, our most serious splits –
 Catholics, Protestants, various stripes of Protestants –
 center around questions of authority.

Scripture vs. tradition.

Faith vs. reason.

Doctrine vs. personal experience.

Your personal experience vs. my personal experience.

Even if we agree together that Scripture is our ultimate authority,
 then it's *Whose read on scripture?*

Whose interpretation?

Does one part of scripture take precedence over another?

And then, finally, if I don't like what Scripture says,
 or how it's being interpreted,

I'll just fall back on my own experience and my own convictions anyway.

But it's an interesting thing about authority:

There are authorities that will try to impose themselves on us,
 but Jesus turns his back on that approach:

You know how the rulers of the nations throw their weight around.

Not so among us!

Instead, I come not to be served, but to serve.⁴

God has been turning the divine back on the top-down approach
 ever since the day after the flood,
 when God hung up his bow in the sky
 and said, *No more hard-fisted power-plays.*

I'm trying something different.⁵

There are authorities that will try to impose themselves on us,
 but it never works:

We'll just rebel – either on the outside or on the inside.

Real authority does not force itself.

Real authority demands nothing.

Real authority simply presents itself

and we say *Yes, of course!*

or we say, *No*, and walk away.

⁴ Mark 10.42-45.

⁵ Genesis 9

The authority of Scripture is like that:

Who ever decided that these particular books should be Holy Scripture?

Did God send down some decree and say,

“Read these books, and not those”?

No. Instead, communities of faith read these books,

shared them together,

tried out different options,

and little by little settled on the particular list that we have,

not because God somehow said, *Pick these!*

but because these are the ones that gave us the Jesus that we know.

These are the ones that fed and nourished our faith.

These are the ones that compelled our trust and our commitment.

These are the books whose own implicit *authority*

called forth our trust.

That’s the thing about real authority, genuine authority:

You recognize it when it calls you.

You recognize it when it makes its own claim on you.

You are here – here in the pews at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Kalispell –

you are here not because anybody told you to,

not because of any tradition,

not because of any societal expectation,

not because God said, *Be here or else!*

You are here because of the voice of Jesus.

You are here because something in Jesus’ voice has caught you,

because something in your spirit recognizes his voice,

because Jesus’ voice somehow compels you, draws you,

and something inside you knows, *I need to be there.*

That’s how authority works.

And it’s not as though you agree with everything Jesus says!

We fight him every day, on all sorts of levels!

There are things Jesus says that make us stop and say

(only with our inside voices, of course),

I don’t know about that.

I don’t understand that one, Jesus.

That one doesn’t make any sense to me.

That one, Jesus, -- well, that one is just a little too threatening.

I can't hear that one yet.

And then, over time, over years and years, perhaps,
Jesus' word sinks more deeply into our understanding
and we come to love even those words.

All of this, of course, because the authority of Jesus' voice
butts up against the authority of our own selves,
and we're pretty reluctant to lay down our arms!

But – in spite of all of those dynamics,
that's why you're here:

The voice of Jesus has compelled you,
and on some level your spirit is saying, *Yes!*

I need that!

That's what authority is.

The central authorities, the keepers of the system, confront Jesus:

By what authority are you doing these things?

Who do you think you are?!

Who authorized you?

So Jesus turns the question back on them:

John's baptism –

from God, or did John come up with it himself?

And now the authorities are caught in a quagmire:

If they recognized real authority when they saw it,
they would be able to answer straightforwardly,
and then, of course, they would recognize Jesus' authority.

Instead, it's time to play games –

play games in order to get the jump on Jesus,
play games in order to avoid the anger of the crowds,
play games in order to come off looking best.

We don't know, they answer:

We don't know whether John was God's agent or not.

We don't know about authority.

You're right, says Jesus. You don't know.⁶

⁶ Vv. 25b-27

We struggle with authority all the time.

And we're going to keep on struggling.

In the nagging social issues of our time, for example,

the church struggles to find a place to stand, a direction to follow,
and much of our struggle is over where we find the authority
for the positions we feel called to take.

- Do we come to an issue
with our minds already formed from somewhere else,
and then seek Scripture to back up our stance?
- Do we come to Scripture already as liberals or as conservatives,
and shape the way we read and hear,
according to where we already stand?
- Do we come, bringing the best that we can,
ready to listen to one another and to the voice of Jesus?
- Do we come, eager for Jesus to form us and shape us?

We are a community

whose sole reason for existence

is that the voice of Jesus has called us,
that his voice has somehow gotten ahold of us,
that something in us recognizes his authority.

Maybe you struggle with a long-standing sense of worthlessness and shame,

but in the voice of Jesus

something in you recognizes
that you are valued and treasured and loved,
so much so that he has given his own life for you!

Maybe you struggle with guilt and wrong,

but in the voice of Jesus

something in you recognizes
that you are truly forgiven and restored.

Maybe you struggle with bondage or addiction or captivity,

but in the voice of Jesus

something in you recognizes that your Savior sets you free.

Maybe you struggle with an overblown sense of your own importance,

but in the voice of Jesus

something in you recognizes the truth
and day-by-day Jesus calls you back to earth again.

Maybe there's something in how you're living
 that you know is not healthy or right,
 but in the voice of Jesus
 something in you recognizes his call to wholeness,
 and, little-by-little, your heart is letting go
 and opening up for change.

Maybe your life has been so bathed in grace
 that in the voice of Jesus
 something in you recognizes where it all comes from
 and you are growing in gratitude and trust each day.

We are a community
 whose sole reason for existence
 is that the voice of Jesus has gotten ahold of us,
 and something in us recognizes his authority.

Jesus follows up his cat-and-mouse game with the temple keepers
 with his riddle about the two sons:

One says, *Nope, no way –*
I'm not gonna do what you want,
 but later that voice breaks through
 and his heart and hands say yes.

The other says, *Sure, I'll go –*
Whatever you want!
 but he doesn't go:
 His mouth says yes,
 but his heart and hands haven't recognized that voice yet.⁷

Chances are, we are both of those on any given day.

But that's what authority is like:

No proof.
 No compelling demonstration that overwhelms our opposition.
 Just the living voice of Jesus,
 singing the truth to us
 until our hearts have no other choice.

Amen.

⁷ W. 28-32