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Matthew 21:23-32

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***Matthew 21:23-32***

***23When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” 24Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 26But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” 27So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.***

***28“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. 30The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 31Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.***

For the past few months our lectionary texts have taken us through the gospel of Matthew, first learning about what it means to follow Christ and what the life of a disciple might look like. Then, our texts began to beyond the individual and teach us more about what the kingdom of God will be like. In each of those lessons, the message was always something to do with how the kingdom of God will be exactly the *opposite* of what we are used to and how things work here on earth, in our communities large and small. Last week, the text ended with the words, “16So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” The *opposite* of our usual frame of reference. That line was a turning point in the gospel of Matthew. The very next line begins Matthew 21, and the setting changes dramatically.

The first verses of chapter 21 begin to tell of Jesus’ approach to Jerusalem, asking his disciples to go on ahead of him and find a donkey, Jesus entering Jerusalem, people waving palm branches and spreading their cloaks on the ground before him. We expect to hear these things during Lent preceding Easter. And we will. During Lent. For now, it is important to keep the context of Lent and Palm Sunday in the back of our mind and imagine the setting for today’s text.

You may remember that one of the first things Jesus did when he entered Jerusalem was go to the temple. He overturned the tables and rid the temple of the money changers, and then began to heal those that came to him. Jesus left there and spent the night near Bethany.

Today’s text picks up with Jesus returning to the temple a second day. For the next six Sunday’s the scripture will all take place in the temple. Jesus will not leave the temple until November.

You may remember some of the times Jesus had been run out of one town or another because his teachings were so radical. The setting for this scripture today is not like those other times. This is the big city, a big holiday – Passover – and the crowds are larger and more diverse than they were in some of the other locations where Jesus has travelled. Even all the big-wigs are bigger. The king has come to town, all the important people are puffing up their chests even bigger. There would have been people in town who were used to being in control, in power, used to being right, and used to having authority, used to being the important one in the room.

So it’s no surprise that the first challenge that comes to Jesus while he is in the temple, is a challenge to his authority. Can you imagine what the day before was like for the chief priests and the elders? Jesus comes in and disrupts the business of the temple, overturns the tables even and acts like the radical he is. The chief priests and the elders probably were really relieved when Jesus left that night; maybe their session then had some strategy meeting, and devised a scheme to put in play in case Jesus came back. They show up the next day – “Ugh! He’s back!” they think to themselves.

Perhaps they think that if they discredit Jesus in front of the people, they themselves will get some of their control of the temple back. “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

Instead of answering directly, Jesus does this major pivot and says “let me ask you a question first.” When a politician does the same thing – manages to pivot and not answer the question asked of them, the intention is to distract and deflect. But when Jesus does this same kind of pivot, and answers as he does, his intention is to not distract and avoid, but bring the chief priests and elders *even deeper into the question* of authority. Jesus wants to talk about the real reason for their question of his authority and get to what their question is really about.

“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it from human origin?” This is not the first time Jesus has brought his cousin John the Baptist into discussions about himself. As the precursor messenger to the coming of Jesus, what people thought about John the Baptist mattered.

The chief priests and the scribes have argued with one another and weighed their options. If we say “from heaven” we’ll look bad because we didn’t believe John the Baptist. But if we say “of human origin” the crowds will not respect us. Now, every school child knows that the best thing to do when you think your answer to a question will get you into trouble, is to shrug your shoulders maybe, and say “I don’t know.” as innocently as you can. So that is what the chief priests and elders answer. “We do not know.” They’re in a bind.

That could have been the end of the encounter. Jesus could have said, you didn’t answer my question, so I’m not going to answer yours; and then the incident would be over. I love that Jesus didn’t stop with this kind of a stalemate.

I believe that Jesus’ parables serve to help us to imagine a scene so that we can have a feeling. Stories that produce feelings in us help us remember them, and to remember the impact they had on us. This is why we play games of pretend when we are kids. We can practice and play act our way into adulthood learning from feelings that our pretending has summoned. The parable Jesus describes contains issues of obedience and authority.

A father asks his two sons to work in his vineyard – a common metaphor for the kingdom of God. One son says, no, but then changes his mind and says yes. Another son says yes, but never does go do the work. Which of the two sons did the will of his father? Did the sons obey? Who has authority in this parable?

When the chief priests and elders gave the correct answer – the first son is the one who did the will of his father – they actually have just shown that they are in a dilemma of their own creating.

By answering the question of the parable correctly, they showed Jesus that they were not as ignorant they led him to believe earlier when Jesus asked about John the Baptist. They showed that they *did* understand the concept of having a change of heart that leads to obedience. The fact that despite this understanding, they *did not* have that change of heart after they saw John the Baptist is what created their dilemma.

*32For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, …and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.*

Remember the heightened tension in the context of Jerusalem. Jesus was a trouble maker just by coming into the city. People knew about him – some came to him to be healed; and others were plotting against him from the beginning. With this interaction in the temple along with the parable, Jesus is setting the groundwork for allowing people to see things in a new way; to have new sight; to change their mind and realize the heavenly authority given to John the Baptist and then to Jesus; all so that in the end, it is God’s will that is done.

What does all that mean for us?

Maybe it means that we too are not as trapped as we think we are. Maybe it means that we can change our minds about the things we allow to have authority over us, and free ourselves.

We can risk the loss of power, loss of standing, loss of influence in order to obey a greater authority. It might be an odd example, and maybe too little too late, but I’m finding that Kevin McCarthy risked his power and standing, and for a moment anyway has freed himself from the trap of his loyalties by working to get at least a 47 day stop gap measure in place to stop an immediate government shutdown. There’s a lot more to say about the larger picture and the powers that be and the future with regard to this one issue. But I wonder if over time, more people need to have a second look at who they follow and why. Who else can you think of who could use a change of heart, and therefore be moved to act in just ways?

Maybe some of the first people who come to mind – politicians, people trapped in the gears of government or other systems – maybe some of those names aren’t realistically likely to change their minds. But there are many who could. I imagine that you or I have times when we stubbornly cling often blindly, to certain patterns that end up making us uncomfortable. Maybe privately we would admit that we freely continue behaviors that are downright destructive for ourselves or those around us. It is risky to make a change. There is a danger that comes with making a change. Our whole world might be upended. But it might be just the thing that makes us return to the vineyard, and do the will of our father\* after all.

Amen.

\*The use of father here, lower case f, refers to the father in the parable, and also in keeping with the fact that Jesus called God “Father,” and in no way means to limit our God to any specific gender.