

“The Question of Jesus’ Authority”  
Mt. 21:23-32  
Sunday, October 1, 2017  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

There’s a story about a little boy who was standing on the sidewalk in the middle of a city block. He was obviously waiting for something. An older man approached him and asked for what he was waiting.

The little boy confidently told the older man that he was waiting for the bus. The man laughed and said the bus stop was in the next block. The boy acknowledged that fact but insisted the bus would stop for him right here.

The older man became annoyed at what he thought was insolence. He raised his voice and told the little boy that he'd better start walking if he hoped to ride that bus. The boy politely turned down the suggestion and said he would wait for the bus right where he stood.

The man fumed at the little boy and started walking off. But before he was too far away, he heard the screeching of brakes. He turned around and couldn't believe his eyes. The bus was actually stopping for the little boy. The bus door opened and the boy started to climb aboard. But just before he did, he turned toward the man down the street and yelled, “My daddy is the bus driver.” (source: Billy D. Strayhorn) If only we trusted God like that!

**I. What authority?**

Today’s reading from Matthew is about Jesus’ authority. Jesus is meant to have authority over our whole lives. Every aspect of our lives – when things are horribly wrong and when things are wonderfully right. So, here are two questions to consider:

1) Do we believe Jesus is God among us? and, 2) If so, what does that belief mean in terms of our actions in the world?

In other words, what does Jesus' authority look like in our lived lives?

The chief priests and the elders question Jesus' authority. "What kind of authority do you have...?" they ask. "Who gave you this authority?"

The chief priests and the elders seem ridiculous to us. From our vantage point, we have 2000-plus years of knowing the story and how it ends. Jesus goes to the cross and dies for the whole world. He is raised again, victorious over sin and death. We know where Jesus gets his authority. Jesus is God incarnate, the embodiment of divine authority, poured out in love into a human life.

But we struggle with similar issues to those of the first century Jewish authorities, don't we? Change is hard! We want to maintain the status quo. We want to keep things the way they are. We feel anxious and afraid when change overtakes us before we're ready. The status quo is our comfort zone.

Jesus' authority automatically brings change. Jesus comes to turn the world upside down. In many ways the institutional church is like the chief priests and the elders. They are in a power struggle with Jesus. So are we. We want things to remain the same. We want things to stay comfortable and familiar.

Do we ever ask ourselves – By what authority? – by *whose* authority? -- are we doing what we do here? Are we calling on Jesus to guide us as his gathered people? Are we allowing his spiritual authority to reign over us, to move among us, to change us? Or are we like the chief priests and the elders in Matthew's gospel, fighting Jesus all the way? Do we cling to our old ways of doing things, as they did?

On a more personal level: What changes are you struggling with in your life right now? What does the question of Jesus' authority have to do with that struggle? What authority do you allow Jesus to have in your life?

We *say* we love Jesus. We *say* we're followers of Jesus. But do we follow him? Do our actions reveal our love for him? Or do our actions tell a different story?

## **II. What action?**

When the religious authorities challenge Jesus' authority, he tells them a story about talk vs. action. One son says he's going to work in his father's vineyard, but he doesn't. The other son says he will not work in his father's vineyard, but he shows up and does the work, anyway.

The son who is all talk – he represents the chief priests and the elders. The son who is all action – he represents the tax collectors and the prostitutes.

These last are obvious sinners. The tax collectors are hated. They line their own pockets by collecting exorbitant Roman fees from their own people. The prostitutes are hated. They endanger the very definition of the chosen people. A child born of a Jewish mother is considered Jewish. But what does it mean when the father is a Roman soldier?

Tax collectors and prostitutes are serious sinners; Roman collaborators; traitors to their own people. At least, that's how they're viewed by others.

So here's Jesus, lifting up these despised violators of all that is sacred, claiming that they are first in the kingdom of heaven! They get in ahead of the high and mighty, ritually pure chief priests and elders!

What action is it that the sinners engage in that makes them praiseworthy in Jesus' eyes? What action is missing from the behavior of the Jewish leaders?

We see it in verse 32. In verse 32 Jesus says of the chief priests and the elders, "You did

not change your minds and believe him.” They did not believe John. And, therefore, they did not receive Jesus. The tax collectors and the prostitutes believed John. They received Jesus.

To receive Jesus is the required action.

Like the little boy whose daddy is the bus driver, we can know who’s in charge of where the bus stops; we can know by whose authority the bus is coming and going. It is completely within the realm of possibility for you and me to believe in Jesus with that same level of trust. We can choose, we can make a decision, to turn our whole lives over to the authority of Jesus. This is the first and most important action we can take in the life of faith.

So, once we have accepted Jesus’ authority, once we have taken action -- in the form of belief in him -- what is the outcome?

### **III. What outcome?**

To believe in Jesus and his kingdom authority is to let go of the world’s categories. This is the outcome. Tax collectors and prostitutes “get in first,” before the chief priests and the elders. Jesus has a preference for the poor. God cares about the outcasts and the rejects -- the people society forgets, ignores or despises.

We are called, then, to look at the judgments we make of other people. We are called to broaden our acceptance of others. We are called to humility. Our place in God’s kingdom does not earn us a front row seat. Our place in God’s kingdom earns us a job – to go out and to find the lost. These others become “first” to us, as they are “first” to God. We become servants, like Christ, because Christ is our Servant King. The least and the lost have priority over those of us who have already been found by God. It’s another way of approaching that most famous of lost and found stories, the prodigal son. The prodigal is “first,” not because he’s better than the elder son. We could argue that he’s worse – much worse. He squanders his inheritance, he drinks to

excess and consorts with prostitutes. The elder son is good, by comparison. Stays home, works hard, remains faithful to the Father's work.

Being "first" or being "last" in the kingdom has nothing to do with being good or bad. It doesn't have anything to do with being loved more or loved less by God. It has to do with God's kingdom priority right now, in this moment. The tax collectors and prostitutes are first because they believe in Jesus. The poor, the homeless, the lonely and the forgotten are first to you and to me because they are first to God. And when they receive Jesus, when they come to a saving faith in Jesus, there is much joy and celebration in heaven and on earth.

As human beings, you and I are always thinking in terms of one-upmanship.

The categories of first and last are different for God. God uses "first" and "last" as a lesson in humility. For the people who are on top of the world right now, God reminds us that we ought to be grateful. We didn't "earn" our good fortune; it's a gift from God. For the people who have fallen into a deep, dark valley of despair, God reminds us that we're first to him, a top priority. We don't "deserve" the suffering we've been given; God suffers with us. Bottom line? – God loves us all, no matter what our circumstances – first, last, up, down, success, failure, joy, suffering, rich, poor. God sees the inward heart. God knows what is truly valuable.

### **Closing.**

Father Mychal F. Judge was one of the thousands of victims of the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001. Father Mychal was the fire department chaplain who, while ministering to the fire fighters working at Ground Zero, was killed by falling debris from the Towers. In Father Mychal's pocket was this prayer that he always carried with him:

Lord, take me where You want me to go;  
Let me meet who You want me to meet;  
Tell me what You want me to say, and

Keep me out of Your way.

This is the essence of accepting Jesus' authority in our lives, of putting our trust in him, of opening the boundaries of our lives to include whatever he has planned for us.

May you go where Jesus wants you to go; may you meet whoever Jesus wants you to meet; may you say what Jesus wants you to say. And may you keep out of His way. Amen.