
By What Authority?

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Atlanta, Georgia
Proper 21A in the Revised Common Lectionary

By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?
Matthew 21:23

By what authority do you do these things? It is a question that the religious authorities asked Jesus; and it is a question that taunts us in every civilization, and in every generation and in every culture. How do you justify what you are doing? Who told you you could do that?

"Well," we are accustomed to saying, "my father told me I could do it." Or, "The teacher gave me permission ... The policeman said I could cross here ... The judge has decreed that I can proceed in this way." We appeal to higher authorities.

But what do we do when the authority is not clear? And what is the higher authority when two different guides seem to conflict with each other? These are the questions that create the true moral choices in every generation. By what authority do we make our moral choices?

We experienced such a serious moral choice this past week. By what authority does the state execute a man who has been clearly and legally convicted of murder? Is there a higher authority? We heard all sorts of appeals this past week; in the end, there was no choice that was not tragic.

By what authority has our American military engaged in overseas conflicts? By what authority did the patriots of the American Revolution fire on British troops in the eighteenth century? By what authority did civil rights demonstrators stage protests across the United States in the 1960s?

The question of authority is always part of the political and governmental process. And it has been part of our Church life, too. By what authority did the Episcopal Church consent to the ordination of a gay man as Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003? By what authority will the Episcopal Church consider the blessing of same-sex unions at General Convention of 2012?

The question of authority has been particularly prevalent in the wider Anglican tradition. By what authority did Henry VIII divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn? By what authority did Queen Mary put to death Thomas Cranmer?

These are not new questions for the State. These are not new questions for the Church. These are not new questions for you and for me.

Jesus, too, receives these questions. By what authority does he heal? Why does he do the things he does? When he receives

the question in today's gospel (Matthew 21), he has just entered Jerusalem on a donkey, with Hosannas everywhere. Then, he went to the temple and knocked over the tables of moneychangers. Then, just after that, he cured the blind and the lame who came to him in the temple.

Naturally, the accepted authorities of the day demanded an explanation. The chief priests and the elders came to him as he was teaching, and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you that authority?"

Jesus, in his lovely divine wisdom, does not have a declarative answer. Just as he often does, he responds to a question with another question, "Was John baptizing because of heavenly authority, or human authority?" For a variety of reasons, the chief priests and elders cannot answer Jesus. "We do not know," they admit. "Neither will I tell you," says Jesus, "by what authority I am doing these things."

I wonder if Jesus actually knew. When the chief priests and elders confess that they do not really know the source of John the Baptist's authority, I wonder "somehow" if Jesus, too, was unable to say specifically, declaratively, where his authority came from.

Now, let's be careful here. I am sure that the authority of Jesus was divine. But I wonder if any of us, even Jesus, can claim that divine authority so easily. I wonder if Jesus, too, had occasions when he could not have answered his own question. "Does your work come from heavenly authority or human authority?" they might ask. "I don't know. I can't really say."

Jesus rarely verbalizes his authority. He rarely claims authority for himself, with words. He simply acts. He simply does things.

He walks through the fields and lets his disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath. He sees a man with a withered hand and heals him on the Sabbath. He touches people. He heals.

Where does his authority come from? In the final analysis, it is self-generated. It claims its own authority. The understanding, the interpretation, the title, all come later.

That is why this parable is associated with Jesus's remarks "this parable of the two sons, one of whom obeys the father's request and one of whom does not. The first one said, originally, he would not obey; he later changed his mind and obeyed. The second son, said the right thing; he said he would obey. But his actions betrayed his words; he did not actually go to the vineyard.

It is the first son's actions that justified him "not his words. It is what he did, not what he said. The actions of Jesus provide him with the authority of God; it is not the words of Jesus that identify him with the authority of God. The actions of Jesus identify him with the Father. That is why this parable is used to explain the authority of Jesus.

In Paul's beautiful Letter to the Philippians, we hear where the real authority of Jesus comes from. The authority of Jesus begins with humility. The first action of Jesus is a movement downward.

"Though he was in the form of God, Christ Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. ... He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:6-8)

Jesus lets go of what might be rightfully his, his higher position as one with the Father. He lets go of that identity. He empties himself. He humbles himself. That is authoritative action. Humility is the foundation of the authority of Jesus. The higher authority is proven by his care for the lowest.

Jesus did not claim anything. He hardly said much of anything definitive about his position. He simply acted. He touched the poor and the sick. He paid attention to the outcast. He healed on days, and in places, that were not authorized. He often did not seem legally justified. He lived by his actions, not by his words.

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

I don't know. I don't exactly know how to say. Words cannot adequately define the authority that comes from humility.

St. Paul, in the Letter to the Philippians, urged us to let this mind of Jesus be also in us. For each of us, whether we part of a household, or a government, or a church, will have moral choices to make, and authorities that may well conflict with each other. By what authority shall we act? The higher authority among us will care for the lowest among us.

To have the mind of Christ means to obey the authority of humility and service. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit," said St. Paul, "but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3-4).

"Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." That is divine authority.

AMEN.

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