

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

Just who do you think you are?

Who told you that you could do that?

Who died and left you in charge?

These are the kinds of questions we get when we assume authority that we do not have. These questions come up when we push boundaries or when we challenge the status quo or when we have misread the norms of a group that we're in. As we are growing up, we test the boundaries a lot to find out what we can do without consequence and how far we can wield our own power. Depending on the situation, we usually find out pretty quickly where the boundaries are as those who are actually in authority bring us up short...verbally or otherwise. Bucking authority has consequences as any teenager can tell you.

As we know, Jesus very often challenges authority. That's part of his mission. He's trying to get people to see things differently than they

currently do when he joins them. He's trying to introduce the rules and regulations...the norms, if you will...of the kingdom of God. And he bumps into earthly authority on a regular basis.

To set the stage for the gospel lesson this morning, let's look at the circumstances of Jesus' current situation. Just days before this incident, Jesus has triumphantly ridden a donkey into the City of Jerusalem in time for Passover. He's being hailed by throngs of rambunctious people proclaiming him as King of the Jews and shouting his praises. His regal entrance into the city has not been missed by the powers that be. They know what adulation Jesus is creating. And they know he is a threat to their own power and status.

The following day, Jesus strides into the Temple and in a burst of indignant rage he overturns the tables of the money changers doing business there. He's furious that they have desecrated his Father's house...a house of Prayer. He promptly sets up shop and begins to preach and teach in the Temple with the throngs of people still surrounding him and hanging on his every word. He is approached by the Temple leaders...the Pharisees and the Chief Priests...who ask him: "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?" They want to trap him into saying something that will indict

him. If he says by his own authority, then he is acting as a rogue agent without cultural or institutional authority. It would be like someone walking into the sanctuary at St. Paul's and standing in the pulpit to preach with no credentials and without an invitation. If Jesus admits that he's acting on his own, then he is sunk. If he attributes the authority to God, then that's blasphemy which is a capital offense. So the Pharisees and Chief Priests figure they've got him!

However, Jesus answers them with a question of his own...which they accept. Jesus wants to know if the baptism of John the Baptist was from heaven or was it of human origin? They have to mull this one over. If they say it was from heaven then Jesus will rightly ask them, "Then why didn't you believe him?" If they say it was from human origin, the throngs of people, whose submission and obedience the Temple leaders must have and who do believe in John the Baptist, will be furious with the Temple leaders and they will have lost much of their earthly power. Either way, they are sunk. They thought they were being so clever in trying to trap Jesus, but they find that they themselves have been trapped by his question. It's dangerous to engage Jesus in conversations of debate or to try to trap Jesus. He is always one or two steps ahead and will end up being the victor whenever he wants. The Pharisees are not nearly as concerned about unmasking Jesus' identity, which is part of what this story is about, as they are with maintaining

their own privilege and power. They aren't defending Jewish Torah and tradition. They're defending themselves and they are trying to get rid of this travelling upstart who is threatening to ruin everything for them.

Jesus, on the other hand, is always confronting us with issues of his identity and with his call to faith in him. Who *is* this man we keep saying? And where does this powerful authority come from? Jesus turns the world upside down. He predicts that the prostitutes and the tax collectors will lead the way into heaven because they *do* believe in John the Baptist and they do believe in Jesus. The privileged religious leaders of the day are going to be the last to enter the kingdom of heaven if they find their way there at all. Jesus is never going to be captured or controlled by them even though his destination in his earthly ministry includes the cross. He will end up there on *his* timetable, not on anyone else's. The earthly powers may think they have him right where they want him, but they do not.

Because the tax collectors and the prostitutes and all the others who occupy the margins of society are at the bottom of the social strata, they are available to hear what Jesus has to tell them...and us...about himself and about God. The status quo is not being very good to them, so they don't have much of a temptation to protect it. They have

nothing to lose. The idea that the social strata might be turned upside down looks very appealing to them. And so they are available to hear Jesus...to learn from Jesus...to be touched by Jesus...to be healed by Jesus. They are open to being transformed by Jesus which is what Jesus' ministry is all about....for all of us. When we are too comfortable with our lives, we are not especially motivated to be transformed. Our earthly reasoning may be, "If it's not broken, don't fix it! Everything's pretty good." Perhaps this COVID-19 pandemic that we're struggling with is a not too subtle reminder that we are not in charge...even of our own lives. But transformation is what Jesus offers us. That's what Jesus brings to us...the opportunity to be transformed. Can we see that? Can we hear that? Are we ready for that? Do we trust that and do we trust Jesus? If I am actually transformed, then who will I be? Perhaps a far better version of who you are now!

While the Pharisees are still standing there with their mouths hanging open scratching their heads trying to figure out how to recover from Jesus' question, Jesus tells the parable of the two sons...the one who told his father he would go to the vineyard as his father had asked but then does not and the other one who told his father "No!" but then later changed his mind and went. Even the Pharisees could identify which of the two sons had done their father's will, but the parable is

about a bit more than that. The parable speaks not only to actions speaking louder than words or actions as revealing our true character, this parable also speaks to the value of being able to change our minds. There's something important about both our ability and our willingness to change our minds. It's a critical component of transformation. We cannot be changed as Jesus is trying to change us unless we have both the will and the desire to be able to change our minds in the face of new and compelling information, including new experiences. What causes us or allows us to change our minds? Is it the recognition of new information or perhaps a new perspective on things? Is it the ability to be able to say to ourselves or to someone else, "I think I may have been wrong about this!" That statement is a huge mouthful and sometimes it's very hard to speak it outloud, but it's part of Jesus' effort to transform us. Not only do our hearts have to be open to Jesus, but our minds have to be open as well. Otherwise we resist the wonderful and life-altering transformation that Jesus is offering us. If we turn our thoughts over to Jesus, are we prepared to hear startling words coming out of our mouths at just the right moment? Or are we prepared to take action that we had previously never dreamed of? Transformation is always a surprise even when it comes in small doses.

As Jesus points out in the parable about the two sons...it is the doing, not the saying that is important. It is the doing that is at the heart of Jewish theology and the heart of Christian faith. In spite of the Pharisees' professed allegiance to God, their pious practices, their hours spent in learning about God, they have shown no actual allegiance to God in their actions...and Jesus is pointing out that it is the action that counts...not the thought or the intention. This passage isn't just about the source of Jesus' authority; it's also about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. And the Pharisees have no corner on the market in terms of hypocrisy. We twentieth century Christians struggle with hypocrisy as well. It appears to be part of our human nature. Even St. Paul struggled with hypocrisy when he confessed, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate." (*Romans 7:15*)

Here's the bottom line: the question is not so much about doing or not doing as it is about recognizing and believing in true righteousness which was John the Baptist and subsequently Jesus. A person's standing in the kingdom depends upon one's response to John and then to Jesus. The real failure of the chief priests and elders is not so much their hypocrisy as it is their unwillingness to receive Jesus.

Open your heart and open your mind. Jesus is waiting to walk right in.
And you'll never be the same.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.