

**AUTHORITY**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 17A, Proper 21—Mt. 21:23-32*  
LPC, 10/1/17

Has anyone else been watching the PBS series on Vietnam these past two weeks? It has been the usual high-quality, extensively researched Ken Burns production. The last several episodes gave considerable attention to the anti-war movement of the early 1970's.

I remember this movement very well. People, mostly young people, began to question authority in a big way, having been convinced, by what they considered the questionable reasoning and mismanaged execution of the Vietnam War, that their leaders had let them down and could no longer be trusted. In the years that followed, as I recall, this led to a widespread mistrust of leaders and institutions.

Interestingly, I see something comparable going on now. In such a climate, all American citizens do not seem to be accepting, or at least prioritizing, the same authorities, whether they are moral, political or social.

Speaking of authority, one of the things I learned from writing a doctoral thesis is that you can't say whatever you want without some kind of authority behind you. You have to think originally, but you also have to appeal to respected, authoritative sources. You have to footnote, in other words. This is still true in academic circles, but naturally the practice of citing sources is relaxed in more casual discourse, especially the internet. And of course, data can be cherry-picked. As Shakespeare said, "Even the devil can cite scripture for his purpose." So controversial issues are not necessarily settled just because they can be footnoted.

The question of authority is an interesting one, and in today's Gospel reading it is one that the religious establishment is concerned with when they see Jesus teaching and preaching and healing in unconventional ways. We know from elsewhere in the Gospels that in Jesus' presence they have appealed to the Jewish law and the prophets, and to their Abrahamic heritage as their own authorities. The implication is that they see Jesus as challenging those authorities. Again and again they try to catch Jesus out in flagrant disrespect of authority, so they can punish or silence him.

In this instance, when Jesus has just cleared money changers out of the Temple, they ask Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Now think about the ways Jesus can answer this. If he appeals to a human authority, the chief priests and elders can say, "We have the Law of Moses and the prophets of the Most High God, and that divine authority trumps your human authority." If Jesus says, "I have authority from my Father in heaven," they can say, "This man has made himself equal to God! Blasphemy!" And indeed this is what they will eventually argue to get Jesus killed.

The point is that the priests' question is a question like, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" that can't be answered truthfully in a way that cannot be considered incriminating. Jesus is a pretty sharp dude, and he realizes this, refusing to fall into the chief priests' trap. Then, neatly, he turns on them a similar question: does John's baptism have human or divine authority?

This is a question they can't answer satisfactorily any more than Jesus could answer their question.

Jesus then goes on, in a parable, to compare them to people who claim they are doing the right thing while in reality ignoring their responsibilities, while other, more humble people, who have no such pretensions, are actually closer to righteousness.

Jesus' experience in this Bible passage invites the question, what do we consider authoritative in our lives?

In our lives, we have many things that claim authority over us: our citizenship, our family responsibilities, our sense of justice. If and when these things come into conflict, how do we decide what is ultimately authoritative?

What is apparent to me, both in remembering the protest movement and observing the current political situation, is that deciding what is ultimately authoritative involves having faith in that authority. In the 60's and 70's authority broke down because people lost faith in their leaders, and I sense the same loss of faith in our leaders today.

Christians are reminded, weekly, that even when human institutions let us down, God keeps faith with us. We can accept God's authority over our lives because we assured that God is faithful and will never let us down.

Now what does that mean for us as we live and move and have our being in our political, professional, social and personal dealings? I cannot stand here and give you specifics. As St. Paul says, we work out our own salvation in fear and trembling. But as we work out how to live in specific instances under the authority of Jesus, Christians can always stand the reminder that we are under the authority of Jesus Christ who as St. Paul tell us, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited but humbled himself.

We do have a higher authority than ourselves to whom we answer, and this means exercising some humility, both with God and with other people. As we do this, may we observe that Jesus' particular message to the religious establishment is that accepting divine authority also means compassion for and relationship with our fellow human beings.