

***Matthew 21:23-32, 2017***

<sup>23</sup>When 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?" <sup>24</sup>Jesus 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. <sup>25</sup>Did 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?' <sup>26</sup>But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." <sup>27</sup>So 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.

<sup>28</sup>What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' <sup>29</sup>He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup>The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup>Which 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. <sup>32</sup>For 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.

Matthew 21:23-32, 2017

Can you think of an issue that causes more controversy these days than authority?

Just look around, check in with your favorite news source, look at the political arena and the sports arena now.

Consider what goes on in the public schools now and how children respond to authority.

I get that as kids grow up they rebel against authority but the violent ways authority is being resisted now brings that to a new level.

You probably had authority issues in your own household at one time or another.

Sometimes challenge to authority is a good thing. Sometimes it is the result of new things we learn.

There was a time when the world changed in a dramatic way with one discovery, which I know has never alarmed you who have known it since before you were in first grade.

“The earth is round!”

That is insignificant to us and gets buried in the information we have access to these days.

But it hasn't always been that way

Imagine it is 1492, and you have learned your lessons well.

You have been in the church all your life and you believe what the priest has taught you about God and the world,  
including the earth is flat.

That is the way the bible describes the world, in flat layers.

Then that year this young fellow named Christopher Columbus took off in a ship to prove the world is round and not flat. In the process he proves the church wrong.

Remember you are in 1492.

You are in the hustle and bustle of a European town hearing and smelling the horses pull carriages over cobblestone streets.

All of sudden the church is wrong. You have invested your life, and gambled your soul on the teachings of the church.

What else might they have gotten wrong?

You have been taught that God promised to raise you up to heaven after you die in a universe that is layered and flat.

So when you die in a round universe and go to heaven you will go straight up.

Now when your Lord died and ascended to heaven 1500 years ago, he ascended from Jerusalem in another direction from another part of this round world. He is somewhere else in heaven!

You will ever see Him.

Remember it is 1492 – 1494. Can you imagine the heartbreak of possibly never seeing Jesus.

The historical records tell us this is what happened to the people of that day.

The authority of the scriptures has been challenged, the church has been proven wrong and its authority in the lives of people has been diminished at that point.

So now, who are you going to allow to have authority over you?

Or, and this is the question more related to our gospel lesson, who are you going to believe?

This is an important thing for us in the church to consider. This world is changing faster than we can keep up.

Just think of the issues the church has taken on and published social statements about in the last 30 years, some of which you agree with and others you don't,

and how that has changed your thinking, not only about those issues but also the church.

Part of what we are about is the observation and interpretation of the events in this world in the context of our faith in Jesus Christ,

and sharing that understanding with the world as our witness of faith and belief that there is a God,

and that God created, and redeemed this world through His Word, who;

*“though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,<sup>8</sup> he **humbled** himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross. Philippians 2:1-13*

You remember Martin Luther had something to say about authority:  
*sola scriptura, scriptura sola.*

***Alone scripture, scripture alone.***

That is the authority he identified as opposed to papal authority over the church.

The physical presence of Jesus in the world was replaced in part by the authority of the Holy Scriptures.

Back to our gospel story,

the Chief Priests and church elders in our gospel lesson are none too happy to have their authority challenged and so they raise their own challenge to Jesus' authority.

But this story starts the day before the story we have recorded in our gospel lesson for today.

On the previous day Jesus made his royal entry into the city of Jerusalem sitting on a donkey as the people threw garments, and branches onto the street as a welcome mat.

There were crowds ahead of Jesus and crowds that followed and all of them calling out,

“Hosanna to David's son. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Save us son of David. Save us Jesus!

After the parade Jesus went straight to the Temple and turned over the money changer's tables and drove the merchants out.

He made room for the blind and crippled to come in and he healed them,

and children were running around the Temple shouting  
“Hosanna to the son of David!”

And the Chief Priests and scribes were amazed at what he was doing  
and became angry,

and the whole city was in turmoil.

Now Jesus comes back to the Temple and he is teaching there when  
the Chief Priests and elders came to him asking,

“By what authority do you do these things?”

These Chief Priests haven’t learned their lesson yet. You don’t ask  
Jesus a question without anticipating all the places he can take you,  
places you don’t want to go,

by asking a simple question in response.

Did the baptism of John the Baptist come from heaven, or was it of  
human origin?

Receiving John the Baptist’s baptism had been the priest’s and  
leader’s first chance to believe and they did not receive John.

Now they are at the cross roads of their second chance to  
believe and receive Jesus. What will they do?

They discuss the question among themselves and the best they can do  
is decide they are caught in a no win situation between Jesus and the  
people.

They simply say, “We don’t know.”

So, then Jesus responds with this parable that anyone would  
understand, to make the point about their unbelief.

And then asks the question,

“Which of the two did the will of his father?”

You know the answer, and so did the priests and elders.

The son who said no, then went and did what he was told.

Now here it comes,

“The tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you.”

The tax collectors came to John and repented and believed. They came to Jesus and repented and believed.

The prostitutes came to John and to Jesus and they repented and believed.

This repentance we speak of here is not just a nod of the head in assent to the truth, but a transformation of life;

giving up old ways of living, not cheating any more, treating your body as God’s temple.

The priests and elders are missing their second chance, and this time the results will change the world forever.

You see, the question is not first of all between saying and doing, but believing and not believing.

They have not believed. They have not received Jesus.

When I first read this lesson this week I thought,

Visualize the Chief Priests saying “We don’t know.” Resigning themselves to their ignorance, sitting down at Jesus feet and saying, “Lord teach us.”

This whole story would have turned out very differently

But as it happened this encounter sets the stage for everything that happens through the rest of Matthew’s gospel, and Jesus’ life in this world;

his arrest, trial, torture, crucifixion, death, burial, and his resurrection and ascension.

The gospel of John is the one that everyone says is the gospel about believing, but it is important to Matthew as well.

In believing I think we have to deal with the matter of authority. Who will have authority over your life personally and as a community of faith?

As a community this is an important question.

We have entered into a time of transition here at All Saints. Who will have authority?

Certainly your elected leaders will have authority and all the responsibility that goes with it.

The bishop's office will have some authority.

There are some things that will be brought back to you as a community, the congregation to exercise authority.

But where are you going to put your belief and trust?

Yes by all means believe in your leaders, and others who become a part of the process.

But, by all means believe and place your trust in the one who knows where you are, and where he wants you to go,

the ultimate authority of your life.

You can give authority to any number of people, situations, social structures, and you can also hold on to it,

ensuring that it is you who has control over everything:

if you want to live in that fantasy land.

This may sound or seem like such a trivial difference, but I believe it is significant particularly when we talk about our relationship with God.

God does not beat you down and steal your heart and force you to love and believe in Him the way a thief would beat you up and take your money, watch, jewelry and cell phone.

God invites you into a relationship with Him, calls you to give authority over your life to His Son Jesus Christ.

You have a choice like everyone else does as to how you are going to allow Jesus to have authority in your life

Both personally and as community.

But it all begins with belief, belief in Jesus Christ.