

By What Authority?

They were both furious and terrified. For nearly 70 years, ever since the Romans had installed the half-breed Herod, so called “the Great,” on the holy throne of Israel, the priests of Yahweh had done their part to maintain the fragile peace in the City of David. Their continued presence, despite the murder of several of their leaders by Herod, had helped to calm the people during the worst of the mad king’s excesses, had prevented them from rising in a doomed revolt when his Roman overlords had misstepped and tried to force their authority too blatantly. They had kept the peace with Herod and his children, they had kept the peace with the Romans, they had even kept the peace with the Pharisees, their enemies in the civil war nearly 100 years earlier that had opened the door to Roman domination.

The priests of Yahweh in Jerusalem had done their rightful part in preserving the worship of Yahweh, which they knew could only take place in the Temple. The Temple and its rites must be safeguarded for how else could the people encounter God? How but through the prescribed practices, so carefully set out in Torah, could the Children of Israel expiate their sins and give God the glory God deserved and demanded? The priests of Yahweh were the link between God and God’s people, just as they had been for centuries. They traced their lineage back to Aaron, just Mattathias had done; Mattathias with his five sons who had won the independence of Israel against the Seleucids, the Hellenistic empire based in Syria. Yes, the priests were not only the link for the people to the Lord; they were also the remaining link to the last truly free period of Israel. It had been warrior priests who had founded the Hasmonean dynasty which had lasted 100 years before the Romans came. It was the priests who would keep alive both the dream of the restored kingdom and the life-giving worship of Yahweh.

They had seen the people through crisis after crisis, had the priests of Jerusalem. And now they had another one on their hands. Another would-be messiah, this Jesus of Nazareth, had ridden into town on a donkey, exciting the nationalist aspirations of the crowd. This common laborer, this nobody with no formal education, couldn’t possibly be the messiah. He had no royal blood, no priestly blood. What good could come out of Nazareth, out of Galilee of the gentiles? And yet he had accepted the people’s adulation, welcomed their shouts of “Hosanna” as if he was indeed the savior. He had let them spread their cloaks and branches on the road before him, accepting the welcome of a king. Was the man insane? Did he realize how his actions would look to the Romans? Was he deliberately fomenting rebellion?

If that wasn’t bad enough, he’d then dared to come and deliberately disrupt the critical operations of the Temple, the functioning of the carefully established customs that allowed pious Jews to worship with confidence, that kept the sacrifices flowing to Yahweh, that ensured that the Law was being followed and that God would preserve Israel. The people needed to be able to change their money to pay their tithes; they couldn’t possibly dishonor the Temple treasury by giving coins with the image of the Roman emperor engraved upon them. Nor could the people be expected to haul animals on journeys of days or weeks from their farms to Jerusalem and have them remain in a proper condition to sacrifice to the Lord. They must have a way to purchase animals that were fresh, clean, unblemished, ready for the altar. Of course the money-changers and the sellers of livestock made money on their businesses! They were providing a critical public service, without which the Temple could not function, the people could not worship. They had to be able to feed their families, too. And of course the Temple treasury received a portion of the proceeds – times were hard and the tithes could not always stretch to pay for the

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upkeep of the huge building and food and clothing for the sections of priests and Levites on duty. The Temple and its faithful servants needed those funds. It was only fair!

But none of this seemed to matter to the so-called prophet from Nazareth. He'd entered the Temple like a whirlwind, overturning the tables of those pious men assisting in the Temple's function, scattering their livestock, ruining their readiness for sacrifice. It was an offense to God! And when those who were unclean had followed him into the sacred grounds, the blind and the lame where they were expressly forbidden to go, he had not reminded them of their sacred duties but encouraged them! Some were even saying that they'd been healed. And he was leading the young people astray – the children! – the children were the ones leading the cheers for this rebel, this scofflaw, this insurrectionist! It was madness! They must confront this deranged man, convince him of his errors or put a stop to him altogether. He was dangerous!

OK, I stole that last bit from *Jesus Christ Superstar*...

One of the things that I learned in my theatrical pursuits over the years is that it's enormously instructive to view the text through the eyes of different characters. When it comes to the stories of the Gospels, we almost always want to focus on the point of view of Jesus or the disciples. But sometimes it's important for us to consider what Jesus' opponents were thinking because, truth be told, their point of view might not be so very different from our own if we were given the same set of circumstances from which they operated.

I find that especially true in the passage that I selected for our topic for this morning. The whole thing looks so black-and-white upon first reading. Well, of course the priests and elders were in the wrong. Of course the authority by which John and Jesus acted came from God. Of course the first son was the one who did his father's will. Of course the despised ones are closer to the Kingdom of God than the self-righteous ones. But I've also discovered in my life that when the meaning of a Biblical passage looks self-evident, then I'd better stop and read more closely. Because if the lessons of the Bible were really self-evident, wouldn't more people be living up to them?

So the primary question for the morning is: would we have felt any differently than those beleaguered priests and elders? If someone with no education, no backing, no experience in government began to attract fanatic followers who started whispering about the overthrow of the government, how would we feel? If we had a recent history of armed rebellion in our region and heavily armed federal troops were posted everywhere and some trouble-maker was threatening to start it all over again, how would we react? If this same guy rushed into our little sanctuary this morning with a bunch of raggedy followers and took over our worship service and intimidated us into leaving or keeping still, what would we do? Would we at least stand up and ask him what the blue blazes he thought he was doing? Yeah, I kinda think we might.

And, really, that's not something that we necessarily need to feel bad about, as long as we remember that it's only one of the perspectives in and on this story. I did manage to learn a few other things in my academic career, besides how to interpret scripts, and at least one of those lessons came from Rev. Dr. Bill Leonard, my church history teacher at Southern Seminary, the founding dean of Wake Forest School of Divinity, and acknowledged expert in the history of

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Baptists in America. Dr. Leonard used to say that the history of the Church is the history of a number of swinging pendulums or contradictory impulses that strive for dominance in the life of the Church but which actually need to be kept in balance to prevent extremism. One of those sets of impulses is the duel between Prophecy on one hand and Order on the other. In our passage this morning, John and Jesus represent the prophetic impulse, the sense of God's immediacy as understood by the gifted individual and transmitted to the people of God. On the other hand, there are the priests, the representatives of order in worship and life. You might say they were the Presbyterians of their day – everything was to be done decently and in order – while the spirit of Jesus and John in this particular story would be better represented by our Pentecostal brothers and sisters. That's not to say that Pentecostals are nearer to Jesus than Presbyterians – there are plenty of ways in which we can see Jesus as the representative of good order, too. But as the priests of Jerusalem and many other faithful people over the centuries have understood, the unchecked prophetic approach can lead to chaos, just as the unmoved establishment of order can lead to inertia. Striking the right balance is an ongoing struggle for the people of God in our collective spiritual lives as well as in our individual spiritual lives.

So now I hope that you are feeling a little less hostile toward those priests and a little more understanding of their dilemma. After all, we've just spent the last three weeks thinking about grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. I think we must give those elders the benefit of the doubt, that they really were trying to follow the will of God as they understood it, that they were trying to preserve God's people from disaster. They may have thought well of the Baptizer, at least some of them, although he certainly usurped their authority by administering rites of cleansing and forgiveness. But John had come to a bad end at the hands of the current Herod, son of Herod the Great, and the priests were not in a hurry to get on his bad side. And they were no doubt aware that Jesus and many of his close followers had been part of John's ministry. They weren't about to give Jesus the upper hand in their argument by conceding John's authority. But neither were they about to further aggravate those whom Annas calls, in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, a "howling mob of blockheads in the street." They were caught in a no-win scenario.

While Jesus may, on the personal level, have had sympathy for them, he does not let them off the hook. "All right," he says, in essence, "let's talk about authority. Do we recognize more the authoritative power of someone's words or of their deeds?" Jesus, frankly, cannot play the authority game with them. Neither he nor John held any recognized office of authority. Neither of them came from one of the leading families. John was part of the priestly descent but his father was a small-town man from an obscure branch of the tribe. What showed their authority, however, was in the way the people reacted to them.

Some years ago, I was invited to teach the major required classes in the Arts Administration program at Bellarmine University in Louisville – an intro to the subject and a senior seminar that was meant to cap the program and draw together the students' disparate learnings from various departments. My dad came to town for a family event one day when I had a class with the senior seminar scheduled and I invited him to come and talk about management from the for-profit perspective as he'd been an executive with several aerospace and manufacturing firms. Early in the hour he spent with my students, he asked them, "How do you know if someone is a leader?" The students all offered various perspectives as my dad listened thoughtfully and listed their ideas on the chalkboard. When they'd exhausted their ideas, he smiled and said, "Here's one

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you forgot. Leaders have followers.” Neither John nor Jesus had the authority of birth or position. Authority from God is pretty hard to prove, especially to a bunch of priests. But they both had the authority given them by the people and even the priests recognized that, even if they would not admit it. They had the authority of their deeds and of the deeds they inspired.

But by refusing to recognize the authority of John and of Jesus, the priests are denying the movement of the Spirit of God in the people who give them this authority. They are so afraid of chaos that they have become prey to inertia. They are like the son who promises to work in the vineyard but does not. Remember that the vineyard is often the symbol for Israel in scripture and the workers in the vineyard are those who prepare Israel for God. The priests have accepted their responsibility to lead the people from the Temple but have failed to lead. John and Jesus, two nobodies, have stepped into the gap. And the people they have led into repentance, people who had rejected the way of God, now follow the way of salvation joyfully. The words of the priests do not measure up to the deeds of the sinners.

It must have been a terribly hard thing for them to hear, even if they truly did not recognize any authority in Jesus. What he was saying to them was that the people they considered the farthest from God’s will were actually closer to God than they were, the spiritual leaders of Israel. It’s a pronouncement from Jesus that should make us all pause. Who are the ones we consider farthest from God? Is it possible that they are doing the things that we should be doing, doing them more faithfully than we do? That’s the lesson of Carolyn Winfrey Gillette’s hymn that we sang before the reading of the Gospel. Do we rely too much on our position as church members, even as ministers of the Gospel? Do we ignore the moral authority that exists in those outside the Church who are actually doing the will of God? Do we turn up our noses at the Kingdom work performed by those members of other churches whose theology is not as “sound” as ours? Guess what – it turns out that questionable theology that leads to acts of grace, love, and reconciliation is pretty good theology after all.

Jesus, of course, never does answer the initial questions of the priests and elders: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” But Matthew, in writing the Gospel that bears his name, provides his readers with the answer at the very end of his book, just in case they haven’t figured it out along the way. It’s a pretty famous passage but we don’t always remember this particular verse. The Gospel According to Matthew ends like this, after the resurrection: “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Jesus, the Resurrected Christ, has all authority, given to him by the One who is the Source of All. And having stated this, he challenges both the worshippers and the doubters: “Go... make disciples.” It is so terrifically important, my sisters and my brothers, that we act as faithful disciples ourselves, that we love even our enemies, that we work for peace and justice and reconciliation, that we feed the hungry, that we trust God, that we walk in the way of Jesus. It is just as important that we make disciples of others, that we teach them what it means to follow

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Jesus, that we enfold them in our fellowship of love, that we equip them to be different in a world that values conformity, that we show them how to find the path in the midst of prophecy and order. Let us not hear this final direction from Jesus and not go. Let us be the ones who go walking, marching, singing, dancing, praying down the holy road.