

“MY THREE SONS”

**Matthew 21:28-32, Proper 21-A,
October 1, 2017**

Our Gospel lesson this morning includes two major sections from the 21st chapter of St Matthew’s Gospel. In the first section we see: “The Authority of Jesus Being Challenged!” In the second section, Jesus shares with us yet another one of his parables about life in the kingdom of heaven. This time it’s: “The Parable of the Two Sons.”

Sometimes the best approach to a text like this one is simply for us to answer—upfront—those five all-important questions: The “Who,” the “What,” the “Where,” the “Why” and the “When.”

“Who?” It’s Jesus and the chief priests and the scribes!

“What?” The religious leaders in Jerusalem are absolutely incensed about the huge amount of vibrato that Jesus has displayed and exercised among them in recent days!

“Where?” This takes place in the temple in Jerusalem!

“Why?” Because on the day before this one, Jesus had entered the temple in Jerusalem and had driven out all who had bought and sold sacrificial animals (*at sky-high prices, I might add*)! Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold “pigeons” saying to them (by referencing Jeremiah 7:11): *“It is written: ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have turned it into a den of robbers’ (v. 13)!*

“When?” This event takes place in the temple in Jerusalem on the Tuesday of that first Holy Week; two days after that first Palm Sunday, when Jesus had ridden into the city streets of Jerusalem on the back of a donkey--in fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures (Zechariah 9:9).

And what did the people do? Many of them took off their outer garments and threw them into the middle of the road upon which Jesus was traveling. They cut down huge palm branches and waved them in the air to his honor; shouting out loud: *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”*

These events are *“these things”* that the religious leaders in Jerusalem had in mind when they dared to ask Jesus, upon his entering into temple on that Tuesday morning: *“By what authority are you doing these things” (Matthew 21:23).*

And what does the word “authority” mean?

One definition of “authority” is “the power or the right to give orders, make decisions and enforce obedience!”

Have you ever stopped to think that we are living in a time when so many people who possess authority are having their authority constantly called into question as never before?

Most of us, as children, were taught to respect and obey authority: The authority of mom and dad; the authority of grandparents; the authority of our school teachers and our principal; as well as the authority of policemen and other government officials.

As children, many of us who are baby boomers even learned some simple games that further drilled this whole concept of authority even deeper into us; long, long before any type of video games ever became a reality!

Do you remember that game: “Simon Says”?

If you were playing that game and the leader said, “Simon says put your finger on your nose!” why that’s exactly what you did! You put your finger on your nose! And if Simon didn’t say it, but you did it anyway—well, sadly enough, you were out of the game because you had to learn to obey Simon!

Not all children, perhaps, but many, many children today are growing up in an entirely different world than the one in which so many of us grew up; when we were taught to respect authority, rather than to question authority!

The Rev. Dr. Luke Powdery is the current Dean of the Chapel at Duke University!

Three years ago, in 2014, when he preached a sermon in Durham on this Gospel lesson this morning, he pronounced something that I believe he intended us to take seriously, but perhaps not 100% seriously. He said: *“If my father told me to do something, I had no desire to question him! If I dared to ask him why, his response was simply: ‘Because I said so!’ If I dared to ask him that question for a second time, there was good possibility that I could have soon come to experience firsthand some ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth,’ or I could even have received a fiery whipping on my GLUTEOUS-MAXIMUS muscles!”* Powdery says: *“I dutifully obeyed because I did not want to see my last days on this earth prematurely!”*

In the Fourth Commandment God does command children to obey their parents, when hopefully, by the grace of God, their parents are godly parents, though many parents today are not! And didn’t so many of those commands that our parents gave us as small children do so much to keep us alive; to keep us safe and out of harm’s way? You remember some of those commands they gave as children, don’t you? “Put on your seat belt?!? Don’t play with fire?!? Don’t do something just because everybody else is doing it!?!? -- But today, we all find ourselves living in much more of an “antiauthoritarian” age!

In the minds of many adults and children too, it now seems as if EVERYTHING is “up for grabs!” Even an NFL football player being paid the enormous salary he is being paid—can openly protest and defy a longstanding and time-honored tradition in Pro Football—that he no longer needs to stand respectfully along the sidelines of the professional football field, with his right hand over his heart—while our National Anthem is being played and sung! Now there is a war of words taking place between the President of the United States and those contentious people willing to defy his authority too. It is all being called—very vociferously—into question—sparking much debate in most every segment of American society today!

But let me tell you that the whole concept of “authority” is a very important theme repeatedly throughout Matthew’s Gospel, especially when we are talking the authority of Jesus! Why at the very beginning of Jesus’ preaching and teaching ministry, St. Matthew tells us that the people who listened to him had become so encapsulated and were so thrilled with his sermons that St. Matthew tells us in Matthew 7:28-29): *“That the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law (Matthew 7:28-29)!”*

In chapter 8, a Roman Centurion, a Gentile no less, acknowledged Jesus’ authority, comparing it to his own authority as a military commander: *“Just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me” (vv. 8-9).*

In chapter 9, Jesus healed the paralyzed man *“so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (v. 6),* and the people marveled that *“God had given such authority to men” (v. 8).*

And here in chapter 21, from which our Gospel lesson is taken today, the word “authority” occurs here four times, twice on the lips of Jesus’ accusers and twice in his response to them!

But the MOST IMPORTANCE OCCURRENCE OF THIS WORD “AUTHORITY” is at the very end of the Gospel, in which our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ gives to his disciples—soon to become apostles—some words that the Church has identified for years now as: “The Great Commission.” Here Jesus says, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”* (Matthew 28:18-20).

These verses say three important things to us about Jesus’ authority.

(1) First of all that Jesus’ authority is God’s authority. This is the only thing that Jesus’ phrase “all authority in heaven and on earth” could possibly mean—for the only ULTIMATE AUTHORITY in heaven is God’s authority. If Jesus has been given all authority in heaven, this can only mean one thing—that he is God and speaks with God’s authority.

In their failure to see Jesus as God’s only-begotten Son in addition to their seeing Jesus as a full-fledged human being—is what made them question so profoundly—his claim that he could forgive other people their sins!

My brothers and sisters, Jesus’ authority is not only God’s authority.

(2) Secondly, Jesus’ authority is what validates his teaching. As we have said it many times before, Jesus spoke to people as a Man who had a direct pipeline to God—which he indeed did have. When it comes to your being a good salesman, people want to know that you really do believe in the product you are selling—yourself. They want to believe that you are telling it to them straight and that you have no hidden agendas. They want to know that you see your job as a salesman—as every bit as important—to you genuinely sharing with other people something that will do the trick for them—rather than you selling what you are selling simply to receive a paycheck to meet your own living expenses in life!

(3) Thirdly, Jesus indeed does have the authority to forgive sins. This is the most important aspect of Jesus’ having God’s own authority as far as we are concerned today—for sin is our greatest problem—and sin keeps us separated from God. In fact, sin keeps us from the truth, for sin causes us to hide from the truth and cling to our sinful ways at all costs.

WE NEED A FORGIVENESS THAT IS BASED ON THE PUNISHMENT OF OUR SINS IN ANOTHER PERSON WHO IS ABLE TO BEAR THAT JUDGMENT FOR US, WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT JESUS DID. JESUS DIED IN OUR PLACE SO THAT HE CAN JUSTLY FORGIVE THE SIN OF ALL WHO WILL COME TO HIM, PROMPTED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, BECAUSE THEIR GREATEST HOPE IS ALSO TO RECEIVE FROM HIM THE GIFT OF GOD’S ETERNAL SALVATION!

Well Jesus answered their question with a question of his own; a tactic he often uses to throw the ball back into his opponents’ court. ²⁴ *Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things!”*

Brothers and sisters have you ever stopped to think that we are living in a day today when more people seem to question authority—more often today, perhaps, than people have ever questioned authority before?

Then Jesus goes on to share with us this marvelous little parable about a father and his two sons. When the first son was commanded by his father to go and work in the vineyard, the first said: *“No way, pops! I don’t have enough time to go and do something like that! Besides, I’m too cool of cat to do something like that!”* But later that son changed his mind and went and worked in his father’s vineyard.

When the father went to the second son and told him to go and work in his vineyard, he replied: *“No sweat daddy-o, that’s cool! Consider it done!”* But that son did not go! Which of these two sons did what his father wanted?

You don’t have to be very old or very mature to figure out that actions speak louder than words! That’s why the crowd answered: *“The first!”* He repented of his sin and allowed the Holy Spirit to correct his course of action!

Then Jesus must have shocked the BAGEEBEES out of those chief priests and scribes when he went on to say to them: *“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John the Baptist came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him. But when the tax collectors and the prostitutes did, they repented of their sins and this is precisely what they did!”*

Friends, I know that we all have our favorite TV stations whether we do have cable or don’t have cable; whether we do have satellite or don’t have satellite; or ROKU, or maybe you even purchased for yourself and for your TV...one those new devices called a FIRESTICK...on AMAZON.

But one of my favorite TV stations, when I just want to sit down in front of the television for a while and not have to think too heavily is ME-TV, that plays some of those old black and white shows some of us can remember being on TV back in the 1960s and 1970s. I remember there was a program my family often watched on Saturday nights—entitled *“My Three Sons.”*

I am grateful that this parable Jesus teaches us this morning is not only about a Father’s two sons, but a parable that prompts me to think about our Heavenly Father’s three sons.

Yes, there were the religious leaders in Jerusalem who said that they wanted to be God’s people, but whose behavior spoke louder than their words.

Secondly, there were the tax collectors and prostitutes—the rift-raft kind that first century Hebrew society; who widely regarded God’s call to holiness as something they were completely incapable of answering! But when they heard about God’s offer of forgiveness and grace, being extended to them through the powerful forerunner of Christ—John the Baptist—why they just couldn’t jump down there into the waters of the muddy Jordan River fast enough, by confessing their sins and receiving the good news that John the Baptist brought them as he point out to them the LAMB OF GOD who came to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29).

He is God’s THIRD SON, Jesus who said that he would obey God’s call upon his life in every way; the key ingredient to his becoming, our Savior! Today as we come forward to receive the LORD’S SUPPER, let give thanks to God for him—Jesus our Living Water; Jesus our Light of the world, Jesus our door into the sheep pen, Jesus our Good Shepherd; Jesus our Resurrection and the Life; Jesus our Way, the Truth and the Life, and Jesus our Vine! Through him God clothes us sinners with the cloak of his complete righteousness and love! In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and gave up his Son to become a sacrifice for our sin! Amen