

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: October 1, 2023

“By Whose Authority?”

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church. In today's scripture readings we are faced with the question of who has authority over our lives and what does that look like. The challenge posed in our Gospel by the chief priests and elders focuses on two closely related, yet distinct questions: “By what authority, or what kind of authority, are you doing these things - such as cleansing and occupying the temple?” and directly to Jesus, “Who gave you this authority?” The first question is about the nature of Jesus' authority, the second about its source.

Jesus then replies to their question with another question about John the Baptist. However it comes out, of course, like a kind of “which comes first the chicken or the egg” question. It has no humanly correct answer, or does it?

Once you have taken a philosophy or psychology course in college you learn to question things. You begin to become aware of "original movers", and "secondary movers" through life. Jesus, in his story about the man with two sons, is explaining the motivation and authority of either a God-centered life with God being the original mover, and the creation of God, his people, as secondary movers - recognizing the gift of life and that everything comes from God.

Jesus knew how to hit back at those questioning him. And although we get a very brief parable, Jesus' response is much deeper for those who are present. The "two sons tradition" begins with Cain and Abel and includes Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Aaron and Moses, and David and his brothers. This is a tradition laden with motifs of envy and betrayal,

struggles for power, and occasionally reconciliation, all with God in the midst.

Because this parable is relatively short, we today may miss the multiple points of resonance with Israel's foundational stories. Jesus calls the sons in this parable "children," just as Israel was often identified as God's sometimes rebellious children.

The first son told his father he would not go to work as asked, but later changed his mind and went. The second son was asked to go work and he agreed to do so, but then changed his mind and did not go.

Those listening to Jesus who replied that the first son had done the father's will, were looking at the end result. The man got someone to do some work in his vineyard. They didn't choose the second son because there was no productivity.

Jesus therefore, explains they did not understand the question. A question that the marginalized in his community would clearly understand. Neither son did their father's will, instead they did their own - choosing the when, where and how, of fulfilling their father's request. We can imagine the father simply wanted to get an honest and accountable response.

Jesus turned the question to those who are questioning him by asking who is in authority in this parable. It is, of course, God. In a way Jesus is saying "beware" to those questioning him as he brings the Israelite history into the present. Beware, are you doing God's will? Or your own?

And for all that this may or may not have meant something much deeper to those standing in front of Jesus that day, it also makes us ask ourselves, who is in authority over our lives?

If you say no to God's calling, whether that is ministry, honest work, befriending those in need, simply serving humanity, then change your

mind, you are making the decision, not God. And trust me, God will be there for you through your journey. You may even have productivity - but you may miss some of the blessings on the way because you choose to be in control. When you put God in a box, you stifle God's creativity.

Again, with the second son, who is in authority here? If you say yes to God's calling, you are all excited, you have great plans, God's energy is burning in your heart, but you procrastinate. Maybe you feel you are not good enough or get distracted by something very human in your life, and therefore don't act on God's calling. You, too, have allowed yourself and your emotions to be in control, and will miss the beautiful blessings God puts before you.

Both of these are lose/lose situations. Jesus is telling us that the tax collectors and the prostitutes will understand better than the learned of the Temple. The marginalized people understand what a lose/lose situation looks like. Typically, it is presented by an upper-class group such as our Temple leaders deciding "God's purpose" for others, leaving them locked in the system. Those on the margin are often able to see and recognize when they have made their own mistakes and are able to take accountability for their choices. We are all sinners. However, some of us are more self-aware than others. These marginalized have accepted giving their lives to God.

Today's scripture is clearly a challenge to ask yourself: who is in charge of your life? Are you putting yourself in a lose/lose situation where you cannot see the blessings or the abundance in your life? Are you saying yes to God when you really want to say no? Or is God the afterthought, that "Oh, sure I can do that when I get to it?" Is it your will you are following, or is it God's? And what is God's will?

In the letter to the Philippians we are asked, *"Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves."*

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

These words sum up today's Gospel as what God is asking us to do. To not be selfish with ambition, to be humble and walk with God. Will you say yes to whatever you feel God is calling you to do? Will you do what you know is the right thing to do? Or will you agree and then do your own will anyway? Are you willing to let go and let God in the true sense.

The answer to the baptism question is that all things originate from God. All works - the works that John did and Jesus is doing is from God. Only Jesus manifests a form of power that requires us to change our minds about the source, nature, and fruit of true power. Can we discern the nature and source of the powers that hold us? Can we distinguish the fruit of divine power in the midst of all that the powers of this world promise us?

Today we beg the question, by whose authority do we live our lives? Amen