

“Authority Issues”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, October 1, 2017

Matthew 22

Jesus has been in Jerusalem for two days. On the first day, he came into town on the back of a donkey, the children waving palm branches and singing Hosanna to the Son of David. He got off the donkey and walked into the temple and in his rage at seeing the temple filled with the money changers surrounded by cages of sacrificial doves, he overturned the tables and threw the place into disarray.

And here we are on the second day and Jesus is teaching in the temple. And the religious authorities, the chief priests and the elders, come to him and ask him, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’

Who gave you the authority to teach in the temple? You could ask me the same question, “Who gave you the authority to preach in the church, to say your words from the pulpit?” My ordination certificate would be one answer. That plus a call from God to offer hope and encouragement and new life through a ministry of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care to which I was ordained.

A topic that I am deeply attracted to for my doctoral work is the question of the ‘authority of the pulpit’. In a present day world of changing values and realities, the church has faced a challenge to what was once traditionally accepted as the ‘authority of the pulpit.’ Today’s spiritual catch basin includes Millennials seeking their own understanding, the ‘Spiritual but not Religious’ finding their own niche that satisfies, and the Nones and the Dones, those who have never been in a church and those who are ‘done with church’. And so into this changing context, the question can be asked, where is the ‘authority of the pulpit’ today?

Rev. Christopher White of Fairlawn United Church in Toronto, in his Sabbatical report entitled, “The Ground Has Shifted Beneath Our Feet”¹ raises serious concerns for the church if it is to survive this changing context. He writes:

“All institutions from government, political parties, education, health and the church have been under the microscope in the past decades. The revelations of corruption, greed and abuse (the legacy of residential schools for the church) has led to a deepening distrust of all institutions and a reluctance to believe what they say or purport to stand for.”²

He also highlighted some points from the sociologist Josh Packard makes in his book, ‘Church Refugees’:

¹ Christopher White, *The Ground Has Shifted Beneath Our Feet - Sabbatical Report*, 2015
<http://www.fairlawnchurch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/sabbatical-report2015.pdf>

² *Ibid.*, p. 9

- People leave because they think that churches are increasingly focussed on their own survival and are looking inward and becoming simply irrelevant in the lives of outsiders.

- People are not looking to have their questions provided with ultimate answers, but rather they simply want to live with the questions in a community.³

Jesus is in the Temple in Jerusalem and his main purpose that day was to reveal the hypocrisy of the temple priests and elders to the people. The chief priests and the elders were the credentialed authorities, empowered by the Roman Empire to be responsible for the upkeep of the temple. They were a small and powerful group of Jews. And Jesus asks them, ‘Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’

The priests and the elders go off in a corner of the temple and say amongst themselves, if we say the baptism of John came from human origin, the crowd will be angry with us because they believe that John the Baptist was indeed a prophet sent from God. And if we say, the baptism of John came from heaven, he will ask why didn’t we believe John when we were there. And so, to get out of the predicament they find themselves in, they decided to answer, ‘We do not know.’

Jesus then offers them the parable of the two sons. A man had two sons. He went up to the first and said, “Son, go out for the day and work in the vineyard. The son answered, “I don’t want to.” Later on he thought better of it and went. The father gave the same command to the second son. He answered, “Sure, glad to.” But he never went.

So who is which son in this text? The tax collectors and the prostitutes – the people who had, by all outward appearances, said ‘No to God – end up coming to believe in John’s message. And they are baptized by John. So they were the ones who said, ‘No’, but then went.

And the priests and elders are the ones who had been saying ‘Yes’ to God outwardly. They dressed the part in priestly robes. They said the right words in the temple worship. But in the end, they were the ones who while they said ‘yes’ upfront, they didn’t follow through.

Their hypocrisy surfaces because they care more about how they will ‘look’ in front of the people and so they answer ‘we don’t know’. Through the parable, Jesus finds a way to reveal what was in the minds of the priests and the elders, making plain that they were the ‘son’ who said, yes, who had all the appearances of going, but in the end has no intention of going. They are hypocrites.

I like the phrase that captures the tension in this parable: “When all is said and done, more will be said than done.” The Church can easily succumb to this inertia. A commentary offers, “How easily ‘church work’ degenerates into little more than simply maintaining the institution, with no excitement concerning what God’s active grace is doing and consequently no enthusiasm for evangelism and renewal. We say that we are going to work in the vineyard, but instead of harvesting the grapes we spend our time rearranging the stones along the path!”⁴

³ Ibid., p. 24-25.

⁴ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary: Matthew* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993), 248.

One of the books I read for my studies was by David Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*. He is urging a new homiletic for preaching that will meet the needs of this emerging postmodern context. He comments on the pitfalls of becoming too bogged down in the institution of the church: “We can become so invested in defending [foundations] for the sake of preserving stability and order that we not only ignore the fact that we cannot prevent social, cultural and intellectual tumults but also lose sight of the edifice we are constructing in the first place.”⁵

Today’s gospel is a corrective for any one who has ears to hear. We are either too bored in our Christianity because of the way we’ve always done it or the way it’s always been, or we don’t care enough to dig down and find out where our roots of faith used to be.

Jesus defines the key moment of struggle for us with his words about the presence of John the Baptist. In Matthew 3, John will see the chief priests and the elders coming towards him as he stands by the river Jordan offering to baptize those who will repent. And he calls the priests and elders ‘a brood of vipers’. And Jesus is now saying to the same group of priests and elders, ‘Even after you saw it, (John baptizing in the river Jordan) you did not change your minds and believe.’ You did not change your minds.

There is this faithfulness in the struggle, that while we don’t get it right, we are given opportunities at every intersection of our day to cultivate the mind that is in Christ, in us. Authority is not church structures or temple priest robes or albs. Authority is how you act out your faith that informs who Jesus is for you. Jesus is asking us, in the moment of awareness, of decision, to change our minds, to be open to a new way, to behold a new thing.

In the parable, the sons were asked to work in the vineyard. Go out and do it. Somehow working in the vineyard isn’t just about doing a day’s work, but it is about knowing where you are, and dwelling in it, and that the work that you are called to has a purpose for it is the work of the kingdom of heaven.

In the last lines of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us about his authority. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” And he gives the great commission to his disciples to go out into the world, and make disciples and to baptize and teach everything that I have commanded you.

You are part of that great commission to go out into the world as disciples. And Jesus reminds you, ‘And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 20