

Introductory

The first part of this reading has parallels in Mark (11:12-14) and Luke (20:1-8). The Parable of the Two Sons is exclusive to Matthew. None of these texts is found in the one-year TLH lectionary. In the LW three-year lectionary, vv. 28-32, but not 23-27 is the reading appointed for Pentecost 19A. The other texts are not appointed in LW or in LSB.

At the beginning of chapter 21, we find Jesus entering Jerusalem; The Triumphal Entry. The scene is one that the Church recalls on every Palm Sunday, as Jesus is hailed in terms that indicate that the crowds who greeted Him thought Him to be Messiah. Then He cleansed the Temple of money changers, healed people, and was praised by children.

He then goes to Bethany overnight. The next morning, coming into the city “He was hungry.” He sees and approaches a fig tree that has no fruit on it. He curses the tree, and it withers and dies. The disciples saw what happened to the fig tree and asked Him about it. He told them that if they have faith, then they will be able to do the same, and more.

He then entered Jerusalem again, and Matthew picks it up when Jesus entered the Temple and began to teach. The religious leaders don’t like that and ask Jesus who He thinks He is. After this text, He tells the Parables of the Wicked Tenants and The Wedding Feast, more proclamation of judgment upon these people who came to Temple to confront Him.

This text deals with the related concepts of entitlement and authority. The religious leaders force a confrontation with Jesus, who they see as usurping their authority and entitlements. As for the timing of this inevitable confrontation, it does not come about because Jesus is saying or doing anything new. He’s not. What *is* new is the location.

In Matthew, up to this point, most of His work has taken place far from Jerusalem, mostly in Galilee. Then, in 19:1 He “went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan...” At the beginning of chapter twenty-one, He is in Jerusalem, the center of Judaism, where is located the Temple and the priests who worked in it.

It was also the place where Sanhedrin rendered judgments. It is those men, “Chief Priests and Elders” who now force the confrontation with Jesus. It was easy to ignore Jesus when He was in far-away Galilee, but now He has come onto their home court, and He’s dunking on them. But He does rather goad them on with His interaction with the fig tree.

A few months ago I read a book review in a magazine. The book reviewed was entitled,

Up with Authority: Why we Need Authority to Flourish as Human Beings. The writer is a man named Victor Lee Austin, an ordained Episcopalian whose New York congregation pays him well to be their “in-residence” Theologian. How does one get that gig?

I borrowed the book and was disappointed and didn’t read very much, but that’s not the point. The point is that an American theologian, and an Episcopalian no less, feels the need to write a whole book whose thesis argues that authority is not a bad, but a good thing. That’s where we are as a society when it comes to the concept of authority.

Humans from most of history would have looked at Austin’s title and thesis and wondered why in the world you would write a book about something so manifestly, true. Why not write a book that argues that the sun will come up in the east tomorrow, or that some days it rains and some days it doesn’t, or that people need food in order to live.

Of course authority is a good thing, most of human history would have said, but since this is today, you may have to review the concept for your hearers. We have spoken before of the difficulty that the “question authority” generation has in getting its collective head around the goodness and downright necessity of authority, even of God’s authority.

The type of authority being discussed here is the authority to speak for God and to teach others the things of God. The priests would have been the primary teachers in the day of Jesus, and it was literally for their own turf that they fought Jesus. The cleansing of Temple, for example, that should have been their call, and Jesus had no business doing it.

As you read through and study this text, you might note the frequency of the word “ἐξουσία,” the typical NT word for “authority.” You may also notice words like the noun “θέλημα” (will) and the verb “θέλω” (I want), words that are about authority, words about who gets what he wants and who is going to obey what that one says.

Most every male, given the choice, would choose to be in charge rather than not. The men in this account are no different, and the authority over which they tussle is the authority to speak for God, in teaching, in preaching, and in rendering judgments on what is right and wrong in individual cases, one of the primary functions of the Sanhedrin.

It’s a struggle that continues to this day, when we find no shortage of men and not a few women who want to be recognized as spokesmen and lately spokeswomen for God. I’m one of them, and it doesn’t seem like all that many people are listening to me, or to other Lutheran pastors who still believe stuff. But the Internet helps us to reach more of them.

When the media want to know what the Christians think, they ask the Pope – naturally – who is the head of the world’s largest Christian church body. When they want to know what Lutherans think, they generally ask ELCA, the largest Lutheran body in America. Seldom and mostly in St. Louis do the media care what Matthew Harrison has to say.

This does not mean that we stop proclaiming and teaching the word “in its truth and purity.” In fact, it means just the opposite. It means proclaiming that Word which is what it is, that’s exactly what we have been sent to do. Do it we must. Our common voice must continue to speak The Word, no matter how many or how few want to hear it.

We keep it up, though our voice seems to be drowned out and seemingly silenced by the screeching of The World and the false prophets. The watchmen must be the watchmen, regardless of how many heed the warning and essentially the way of escape found in Jesus. If you warn them, and they don’t hear, that’s on them. If you don’t warn them....

Textual Notes

Question of Authority

23. Jesus enters Temple, and He has company, “ἐλθόντος αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸ ἱερόν προσῆλθον αὐτῷ διδάσκοντι οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι τοῦ λαοῦ – Having gone into the Temple, He was teaching, the Chief Priests and Elders of the people came to Him.” The verb ἔρχομαι indicates motion, and it can be and is translated either “to come” or “to go.”

The verb προσέρχομαι, used to describe the motion of the religious leaders, means that they approached Jesus. Matthew’s placement of the verb “διδάσκω – to teach” is curious. The word order seems to indicate that the religious leaders were an interruption to the teaching of Jesus, which they were. They interrupt His classroom and begin to speak.

The Priesthood was a hereditary office held by those who could trace their ancestry back to Aaron. It was their task to serve in the Temple, offer sacrifices, and teach the people. If a priest were a really good teacher, he might earn the honorary title “Rabbi.” The Chief Priest was the leader of the other priests. There is more than one Chief Priest here.

Only one person could be Chief Priest at any given time. At the time of Jesus, the person holding the office of Chief Priest changed frequently. Matthew must here be referring to previous officeholders as well as the current one. We refer to former Presidents, Senators, military men, et al by their title, even if they no longer hold that office or rank.

They have a question for Jesus. It looks like a reasonable query, especially from them. It’s a question about the very basic issue of “ἐξουσίαν – authority,” the Formal Principle of Jesus. They ask “Ὡς ποῖα ἐξουσία ταῦτα ποιεῖς; καὶ τίς σοι ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν ταύτην – by what authority you do these things, and who gave you this authority?”

We ought not to be surprised that these men asked this question of That Man. In confronting Jesus like they did and asking that question, it was probably nothing personal

but standard procedure. They would have confronted and challenged anybody (except for themselves) who was doing and saying the things that Jesus was saying and doing.

We note that they are asking Jesus about His authority *do* things, and which things was He doing that they didn't think He should be doing? Probably they did not like Him driving out the money changers. For sure they did not like it when He cursed the fig tree, which was about them, and which He did immediately before they asked the question.

We know that His doing miracles was a trigger for them. But mostly, and here, they did not like it that Jesus is teaching. We're not talking about what Jesus is saying, but just the fact that Jesus is teaching in the first place. He is seen by them to be usurping their authority. They, as a matter of course, were supposed to teach the people about God.

And to add insult to injury, He was doing it on their home court, in the very place where they saw themselves as the ones having authority to teach. They also understood that authority to teach at that place to be from none other than God Himself. Long before the Divine Right of Kings, these men thought that they had that authority by virtue of birth.

24. Jesus has already made it clear on several occasions that His authority comes from His Father, and He has done so in a most emphatic way. The people asking the question – in the manner of good lawyers of all times and places – think they already know that answer He's going to give because of what He has said previously. But not this time.

In response to their question, He has a proposition for His questioners, ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Ἐρωτήσω ὑμᾶς καὶ γὰρ λόγον ἔνα – Jesus responded, saying, 'I will ask you one thing.'" The primary meaning of the noun "λόγος" is "word," but here it carries the secondary meaning of "utterance" or "saying." He has one question for them.

One question, and "ὃν ἐὰν εἴπητέ μοι, καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιῶ - if you tell (answer) Me, I also will tell you by what authority I do these things." Their complaint is that He usurped their authority, which He did. They took that authority back by questioning Him. By answering their question with a question, He takes it back.

It was rude of them to interrupt His classroom, but Jesus does not return rude for rude. Maieutic instruction, answering a question with a question, uses "the Socratic method of eliciting knowledge by a series of questions and answers," Collins Dictionary. The teacher uses this kind of instruction not only to show a student that he's wrong, but

they are often trying to help the student develop the skills and tools to create their own positions and understand where the weaknesses of and strengths of those positions lie...Maieutic means mid-wifery, and this method has been framed as a technique for bringing ideas into the world instead of simply demonstrating that the respondent lacks knowledge.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4Mr9VKzJE4>

Far from being rude or in any way hostile, Jesus the Teacher is teaching these men things they already know; They just don't know that they know them. In a certain sense He is also teaching them how to think, which they also know, as we shall see. One question is all it takes to teach them a very valuable truth, but it has to be the right one question.

Aristotle's three Modes of Persuasion are ethos, logos, and pathos, concepts that roughly coincide with integrity, reason, and emotion. The speaker must firstly have integrity (ethos), so that what he says can be believed. If he doesn't have integrity and can't be believed, then it doesn't matter what he has to say. That's what this exchange is about.

The good speaker, including the good preacher, will intentionally engage the mind (logos) of the hearer, like Jesus is doing here. He will also try to move the hearer to a physical change known as emotion (pathos), which the Lutherans fear. When He cursed the fig tree, and they knew He was talking about Him, do you suppose they felt anger?

25. He brings John the Baptizer into the conversation. He does not talk about authority, Everybody knew about John's Logos (credibility), Aristotle's First Mode of Persuasion. The late John and his Baptism were both very well known to all. The question posed by Jesus to these men was whether the Baptism of John was "from heaven" or "from men."

He asks, "τὸ βάπτισμα τὸ Ἰωάννου πόθεν ἦν; ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἢ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων – Baptism of John, from where was it, out of heaven or out of men?" In two ways He emphasizes the origins of John's Baptism, and by implication of John's entire ministry. First, He uses "πόθεν – from where," the adverb of origins, followed by "ἐξ," the preposition of origins.

That may or may not sound like it would be a common word combo, but it isn't. This is the only time I see those two words one after the other like they are here, and it gets to the heart of the presenting question of authority and Jesus. Jesus thinks He has authority to do and say things. They want to know what is the basis or origin of that thinking.

Jesus is a man of integrity. He also feels emotion, He often by what He says and sometimes by what He does causes people to have emotion. Here we see Jesus engaging the minds of his hearers. Speaking of those clergypersons who have engaged Jesus, Matthew says that "οἱ δὲ διελογίζοντο ἐν ἑαυτοῖς – they reasoned among themselves."

That word is the etymological root of our word "dialogue," and it's in the imperfect tense – they kept at it. The verb διαλογίζομαι is not a common word in the NT but was a very common word then. It was often used in writings to describe legal proceedings, one of the three or four venues where the Modes of Persuasion were used in the Ancient World.

A related and similar verb, διαλέγομαι, is quite often used in the book of Acts to describe Paul's interactions with various people. God gave us brains that uniquely among His creatures are able to reason, and it's okay to think. The problem comes in when reason is elevated above revelation, which began with John Calvin and even the later Scholastics.

By His words, Jesus causes these men to think, to reason, to use logic, and that's a good thing. Their combined brains quickly recognized that the question of Jesus has them put them into a logical quandary. There could be no right answer to the question, or at least not one that fit into their preconceived theological notions about Jesus and authority.

26. So they can't say that John's authority was from heaven because that would mean that so is the authority of Jesus, and the alternative is no better, "ἐὰν δὲ εἴπωμεν Ἐξ ἀνθρώπων, φοβούμεθα τὸν ὄχλον – if we say from men, we fear the crowds." How very self-aware of them, to know that their theology is affected by what the hoi polloi think.

They tie their reasoning up by stating the obvious, "πάντες γὰρ ὡς προφήτην ἔχουσιν τὸν Ἰωάννην – for all hold on to John as a prophet." The verb is "ἔχω – to hold or possess," and it means that they thought John to be a prophet from God, but that they grasped on tightly with two hands to the idea that John spoke from God. If John did, then Jesus did.

I have talked about John and Jesus being "joined at the hip." It's an idiom that means "Closely connected, as in an intimate friendship," or as in the message of John and Jesus was the same message, as described by Evangelists like Matthew with the exact same words. To reject "the things" of Jesus was to reject John, and that would bring problems.

27. Finally, incredibly, they uttered those two words theologians hate and doctors fear, "Οὐκ οἶδμεν – We don't know." Remembering the deal that had been struck, or maybe we should say that deal that He had foisted upon them, Jesus says since they can't answer His question, He will not answer theirs, and He doesn't. But He does tell them a story.

Parable of the Two Sons

28. The story includes a man, his two sons, John the Baptizer, tax collectors and harlots, and them. The story is about actual obedience to authority. The story also includes Jesus asking another question, presumably to these same men, and them answering Him, and by this time the question about Jesus' authority has very much gone by the wayside.

He begins the story by informing them that they will be tested on this material, asking them "Τί δὲ ὑμῖν δοκεῖ – What do you think?" At the risk of getting preachy about preaching, if a speaker wants to engage the mind of the hearer and make the hearer think which is a good thing because man is built to think, and man likes to think, just ask the hearer what he thinks, like Jesus does here.

What could be a better invitation to the hearer to think than to ask what the hearer thinks? It's an invitation that is always welcome and readily accepted. It's the reason why people, of their own volition, do puzzles, watch game shows, and play Monday morning

quarterback with each other. People will be thinking about something on Sunday morning, and your job is to cause them to think about God.

Another way to make the hearer think is to ask a question that does not include the word “think.” Two weeks ago, the first paragraph had me talking about debt and using the figure of “10,000 Talents.” Do you suppose people were wondering how much money would that be in today’s dollars? I told them in the second paragraph. Of all the words uttered in the hand-shaking line, the words “Pastor, you made me think” are some of the most pleasant to hear. Engage the mind.

“How does it seem to you?” would actually be a more accurate, though not necessarily better translation. By the end of the story, known as The Parable of the Two Sons, the answer to the question is obvious. Like last week’s parable, this one also is set in a vineyard, and we presume that the man with the two sons owns the vineyard, giving them all the more incentive to obey his command to go to work.

The father goes to the first son and speaks two imperatives; “Τέκνον, ὑπάγε σήμερον ἐργάζου ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι – son, go today and work in the vineyard.” The first imperative verb is “go – ὑπάγε, a present active imperative form. The second imperative verb is “work.” That verb is ἐργάζου, the present active imperative form of ἐργάζομαι. The present imperative indicates connection to person.

29. Sounding remarkably like a two-year-old, the first son says, “Οὐ θέλω – I don’t want to go,” but he later changed his mind and went; “ὥστερον δὲ μεταμεληθείς, ἀπῆλθεν.” The first verb occurs only six times in the NT, fewer than the thirty-four occurrences of the more common “μετανοέω.” Both words mean “change” and are often translated with “repent,” and the one that occurs here seems to be more personal and less general. He will apply the word to the clergypersons in verse thirty-two.

30. Next the father goes to the second son and says “ὡσαύτως – the same thing” to him. This son says, “Εγώ, κύριε· καὶ οὐκ ἀπῆλθεν – I (go), Lord, but he did not go.” Elliot notes that “The tone of outward respect, as contrasted with the rude refusal of the elder son, is eminently characteristic as representing the surface religion of the Pharisees.” It also represents the same in some Christians today.

31. Now Jesus brings down the hammer, the rhetorical question, “τίς ἐκ τῶν δύο ἐποίησεν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρός – which of the two did the will of the father?” or “did what the father wanted?” He gives them only two choices, and they answered in the only way possible, “the first,” and then Jesus launches into a sermon in which He explains the point of the parable and its application.

The sentence that must have burned their ears is “οἱ τελῶναι καὶ αἱ πόρναι προάγουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ – the tax collectors and the prostitutes lead you into the

Kingdom of God.” Explain to your hearers again exactly why the tax collectors were so hated by the Jews in the days of Jesus.

The IRS used to be a good starting point when doing that explaining, but they seem to have gotten a lot nicer over the years. Remind the hearer of the Roman occupation, and ask rhetorically how we would like it if Canada conquered and occupied us. Maybe talk about how tax collectors were agents of the Roman government, and how the more money they were able to collect, the bigger was their paycheck.

The problem with talking about hookers in church is that you end up talking about hookers in church, and that can get awkward. And yet, it doesn’t seem like that when Jesus talks about hookers, even when He’s at Temple. I don’t think we need to explain why these women were on the bottom rung of the social ladder with no means to climb out of their pit.

No woman chooses to hook, but some find themselves there, usually and especially in the time of Jesus, as a means of last resort. Unlike the role tax collectors in the time of Jesus, the concept of prostitution is not a hard one to grasp. The hearer has heard the reading, and they know without our explaining why these women were looked down on, because we also look down on them.

When hookers do come up in the Bible, it’s generally a good time for us to use the figure of speech known as “euphemism.” From the pulpit, I may refer to hookers as “working girls,” or “women whose career choices were limited,” and I may refer to an individual hooker as “one of those kind of girls” or “a girl you wouldn’t bring home to your mother.” I avoid using words like “hooker” and “prostitute” and “whore” from the pulpit because it can be distracting, and not in a good way.

The thought that people from either of these two groups, let alone people from both of these groups, would be leading them into the kingdom would have been to these men absolutely unthinkable, but that’s just what Jesus says, addressing them with the plural pronoun “ὅμοις,” as in “tax collectors and hookers will go before you (Chief Priests and Elders) into the Kingdom.”

The verb “προάγουσιν – will lead” is in the present tense, and it means that the one group will follow behind the other group. The word is often found in reference to the first person in a procession or a parade, the leader. These men would have thought themselves to be at the head of that greatest of all processions, but in fact they would be behind the tax collectors and hookers, who would be leading the way. Ouch.

32. Jesus then goes on to explain Himself and tell them why He thinks what He thinks, and why He says what He says. We would be remiss if we were to not acknowledge that for Jesus, this is personal. Any mention of John is bound to cause in Him, who was fully and completely man, a variety of emotions.

He tells these men that John " πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν ὁδῷ δικαιοσύνης – toward you on the road of righteousness," the thing to which every religious person, including these religious persons, sought to attain. The problem was that they did not believe John. But the tax collectors and hookers, on the other hand, did. Here we have one of the clearest proclamations in all the NT of the doctrine of Justification by Faith.

People heard the words of John, nearly universally recognized as the Word of God, and some of those people believed and were saved, and others did not believe and were not saved. It's the same thing today. Of them, He says "ὁμοῖς δὲ ἰδόντες οὐδὲ μετεμελήθητε ὥστερον τοῦ πιστεῦσαι αὐτῷ – you, even seeing, did not later repent and believe." And just what was it that they saw?

That brings us back to the original question, about authority and by what authority Jesus "did" things, things that they saw Him do, and yet still did not believe in Him. Jesus is genuinely incredulous that these religious men, seeing what they had seen, had not changed their minds and believed what John proclaimed. What had they seen? They had seen the tax collectors and hookers flock to John and believe what he had to say.

These same people, who had in their former lives made no promise to work in the Kingdom, became believers through John's preaching, and were now apparently working in the Kingdom. Not so much these religious men, who all the time talked about how good they were, and how bad everybody else was, but who didn't actually do much good. They are the original example of people who do not practice what they preach.

Law/Gospel

Unbelief/Belief – The Natural Man can spend a lot of time and effort trying to work his way to heaven, but in the end he does not believe in Jesus, none of his supposed good works count, and he ends up in Hell. Working through Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit makes believers out of hardened sinners; like the tax collector, like the hooker, like us. Believing, we are saved and end up in heaven.

Ignorance/Knowledge – The Natural Man is truly Agnostic. He knows that there is a God, but he doesn't know that God, so he makes gods up. Through Word and Sacrament, the One True God has revealed Himself to us, and we know Him, and through those same means we know Him better and better all the time, and the important questions of life become more and more clear.

Disobedient/Obedient – We are the ones who say that we will go, but then do not. Jesus is the one who says that He will go, and then He goes. We become the ones who did not want to go, but we follow Him into the field.

Sermon Titles

Who Does He Think He Is?

What Do You Think?

Louder Than Words

Hymns

Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us – LSB 851

Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousness – LSB 563

Lord, Tis Not that I did Choose Thee – LSB 573

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word – LSB 655

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa

Resources

ACC – Manlio Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Matthew)*.
Intervarsity Press, 2002

BAG – Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Translated by
William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979

BCLY – William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*. The Westminster Press, 1975

FGG – James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar*. Concordia Publishing House,
1993

GBS – Jeffrey Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary, Matthew*, CPH, 2006

GND – Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*,
Eerdmans, 1982

MGM – W.F. Moulton, A.S. Geden, H.K. Moulton, *A Concordance to the Greek
Testament*. T & T Clark LTD., 1978

MM – James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek
Testament*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982

ODCC – F.L. Cross, Editor, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford University Press, 1978

RNK – Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, 1976

RSV – Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Zondervan Publishing House, 1965

SCR – David Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church*, CPH, 2004

UBD – Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, 1977.

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VINE – W.E.Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984

WIK – www.wikipedia.com

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GBO – www.greekbible.com

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Internet Classics Library – www.classics.mit.edu

Christian Classics Ethereal Library - www.ccel.org

Project Wittenberg - www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html