

SERMON “OBEDIENCE BRINGS BLESSING—AUTHORIZED BY JESUS”

(Matthew 21:23-32 Preached at MPC on October 1, 2017)

When the Bible talks about scribes, Pharisees, and chief priests, we pretty much know what to expect. They were religious leaders, but we know them as Jesus' enemies. They were always scheming against Jesus—using what I call the 3-T approach—trick, trap, and trip him up.

Sometimes it's fun to read the stories about them, because they often find themselves caught in the trap that they had set for Jesus. Reading about the scribes and Pharisees is a little like watching a Roadrunner cartoon. You remember Roadrunner Wile E. Coyote. The scene would open with Wile E. Coyote standing at the lip of a cliff, struggling to push a huge boulder to fall on the Roadrunner as he comes by on the road below. Then we would see Roadrunner running along the road at warp speed. Wile E. Coyote struggling to push the boulder in time to squash him.

Roadrunner would zip by—beep, beep—before the rock ever posed any danger—Wile E. Coyote, in his panic, would trip and fall over the cliff. We would see him falling through the air and being squashed flat as he hit the road. He would then pick himself up and begin to pull himself together and then he would look up—and there the rock would be right above him—and Wile E. Coyote would find himself squashed flat one more time by the rock that he had intended for Roadrunner. And then we would see Roadrunner moving again at warp speed—beep, beep! I loved the Roadrunner cartoons.

When the scribes and Pharisees try to trap Jesus, they often fall into their own trap. It's fun to watch—especially if you're a Roadrunner fan! But sometimes, it seems like the Jewish religious leaders get a bum rap. Like today, for instance! In our Gospel lesson today, the chief priests and elders ask Jesus where he gets his authority. That was a legitimate question! The chief priests and elders were responsible for the religious life of Israel, and Jesus was doing some unusual and provocative things. For one thing, just before today's Gospel lesson, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey while the people shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" And Jesus did nothing to correct them.

Then Jesus went into the temple, where people were buying and selling animals for temple sacrifice, and others were serving as moneychangers. These sellers of animals

and moneychangers were well within their rights to do what they were doing. Nothing happened in the temple without the permission of the priests, so the sellers and moneychangers must have asked for and received permission to do what they were doing. In other words, they were AUTHORIZED! For many of our military men and women, active or retired, you know and understand the meaning of the phrase “esprit de corps”—that’s the common spirit existing especially in the members of a military group—that spirit inspires enthusiasm, devotion, and strong regard for the honor of that group. You also know and understand the meaning of chain of command— you know what the word AUTHORIZED means! If you are authorized, you can do it. If you are not authorized you cannot. It's that simple!

Well, these animal sellers and moneychangers were AUTHORIZED by the Jewish temple leadership. They had permission to sell animals and to change money on the temple grounds. The priests had given them permission, or they could not have done what they were doing. And there was a good purpose behind their activity. People came from afar to make sacrifices at the temple, and it wouldn't work to require them to bring their own animals. Sacrificial animals had to be outstanding specimens—perfect with no blemishes.

Just imagine trying to bring a lamb from Nazareth or some other faraway place—having picked out the best of the flock—and seeing the animal injured on the long journey. Then you wouldn't be able to make your sacrifice. And then you would have to take the injured animal home again. Now that wasn't practical at all—and so the priests had AUTHORIZED these sellers of animals and these changers of money to do what they were doing in the temple. It was a public service and it also brought in some money to the temple. It made sense, and so it was AUTHORIZED!

But when Jesus walked into the temple, he went directly to the moneychangers and turned over their tables and scattered their money all over the floor. He accused the merchants of making God's house into a den of thieves. Can you imagine that! These people were well within their rights! They were AUTHORIZED to do what they were doing!

And then Jesus set up shop inside the temple, as if he owned the place, and began to teach. Now, to teach in the temple, one needed to be a rabbi. To be a rabbi, one had to go through the proper training—and the laying on of hands in other words, ordination.

Jesus was not properly trained, and no one had ordained him. What right did he have, then to teach in the temple? None! But there he was, teaching the people, and the people were acting as if Jesus was someone really special. But Jesus was NOT AUTHORIZED! So, the chief priests and the elders asked Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (v. 23). Great question! Exactly the right question they needed to be asking!

In other words, they were asking Jesus if he was AUTHORIZED and if so, by who's authority? There was only one right answer, because only the priests could authorize a person to do what Jesus was doing—and they had not AUTHORIZED Jesus. And, if Jesus was not AUTHORIZED, what he had done to the animal sellers and the moneychangers was clearly wrong, perhaps even criminal—and that made his teaching in the temple questionable. So, the priests and elders asked, "By what authority do you do these things, and who gave you this authority

But Jesus responded by asking them a question. He told them that, if they would answer his question, he would answer theirs. He asked, "The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?" (v. 25). He was talking about John the Baptist, the great prophet—greatly respected by the people and dearly beloved by nearly everyone—but not dearly beloved by the chief priests and elders. So, Jesus asked, "The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?"

That was a good question too, because Jesus was asking who AUTHORIZED John the Baptist to be a prophet. As a prophet, John's authorization came straight from God. Everyone knew that except the chief priests and elders. The chief priests and elders would not admit that John was AUTHORIZED, because they had not AUTHORIZED him. It was a power thing! The chief priests and the elders were in charge, and they didn't like people like John the Baptist or Jesus coming out of the blue and claiming authority from God—thereby challenging their authority as priests and elders.

By this time, John was already dead, beheaded by King Herod. The chief priests and elders must have breathed a sigh of relief when they heard the news of John's death. One down and one to go! But now Jesus was asking, "The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?" That put the chief priests and the elders in a bind. If they said that John's authority came from heaven, then Jesus would ask why they had not obeyed John. If they said that John's authority did NOT come from heaven, then

the people would revolt against them because the people knew that John's authority DID come from God. That was very clear to the people, and they would not tolerate anyone even these powerful priests saying anything bad about John. So, the chief priests and elders said, "We don't know!" (v. 27). But it was their JOB to know! It was their job to protect the people from false prophets. It was their job to make decisions about prophets! But they said, "We don't know!" So, Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (v. 27). Round one for Jesus! Beep, beep!

And now, if you look up, you will see that big rock just beginning to fall! The big rock comes in the form of a story. Jesus told the story about a father who had two sons. He asked the first son to go work in the vineyard, but the first son said, "No way!" But then, later, the son realized that he had been wrong, so he went into the vineyard and obeyed what the father had asked him to do. In the meantime, the father asked his second son to work in the vineyard, and the second son said, "Sure, pop!" But instead, the second son wandered off distracted doing his own thing, and never did get to the vineyard.

Jesus asked the chief priests and the elders, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" (v. 31). Now the chief priests and the elders must have realized at this point, that they were in deep trouble, but they couldn't say, "We don't know!" again. Everyone was watching, and they were already looking pretty foolish. To say, "We don't know!" one more time would have confirmed that they were, indeed, incompetent. So, they answered that the first son, the one who initially looked disobedient, but turned out to be obedient—that first son was the one who had done the will of the father.

So, Jesus said to the chief priests and elders and I want you to hear this—keep in mind Jesus is talking to best of the best—the holiest of the holy—Christ said to these holy men: "Most certainly I tell you that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering into the Kingdom of God before you." For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you didn't believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. When you saw it, you didn't even repent afterward, that you might believe him" (vv. 31-32). Beep, beep! KABOOM! There goes the boulder right on their heads.

That was harsh language for Jesus to use on these holy men, but we're glad that he did. We've seen people who seemed to be something that they were not—in other words phonies or hypocrites! We're glad to see them exposed! We've seen powerful people who use their influence to keep themselves in power—rather than using their power to

help and serve people— we're glad to see them brought down!

But there are a couple of problems with Jesus' story. One is the problem with today's unscrupulous tax collectors, prostitutes, and general group of unrepentant sinners. It's all too easy for sinners today to read this story and think, "Sure I am terrible, but at least I am honestly terrible—and so I am better than these holier-than-thou hypocrites who go to church every Sunday! We must be careful not to take that attitude. Jesus calls us to holiness—honest holiness—not to a life of judging other people.

The other problem with this story is that we might think that it concerns people who lived two thousand years ago—and has nothing to do with us today. That, too, would be a total misinterpretation. This story has everything to do with us today. It speaks with special power to preachers, elders, deacons and Sunday school teachers and well truthfully, it speaks to all of us who try to be true Christians. It warns us that, if we're not careful, we too could become smug and self-satisfied. It warns us that if we don't stay humble, repentant, and obeying God, we'll wake up someday to find that we the good guys are really the bad guys—and the bad guys are the good guys.

In her book, *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells about a Methodist pastor from Montana. She doesn't give the pastor's name. This pastor told Kathleen about a woman who had become a member of their little church. She had been a terrible alcoholic and drug addict. She also had the reputation of one who sleeps around with whoever was interested. And then something amazing happened! She sobered up! She started going to AA meetings! She got help for her drug habit and stopped sleeping around. And then some of her AA friends took her to church! Now stop and think about how much courage it took for that woman to step inside that little church in that small Montana town! But she went and kept going back—and then she joined the church. And then she started volunteering for things! She volunteered for everything that came along. She started studying—and teaching—and visiting. Kathleen Norris sums her up this way: "Salvation took a hold in her and she couldn't get enough of it!"

Going back to Jesus' story, which kind of son or daughter are you? Are you like the first son, who didn't want to obey the father—but finally did? Or are you like the second son, who said that he would obey, but did not? Are you a renegade—a rebel—but a person who finally decides to do the right thing? Or are you one of those people whose name is on the church rolls but who never does anything for Jesus? Or are you one of those

people who obeys Christ when it feels right, but who feels free to disobey the rest of the time? Or are you one of those people who says, " I just don't want to get involved!" Or are you one of those people who just doesn't care! Jesus says be careful—we might be surprised who gets into heaven instead of us—Let us rejoice, always knowing that in Christ, obedience to God brings blessings! This is authorized by Christ himself! Amen!