

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Richard G. P. Kukowski at Grace Church, Silver Spring, Maryland on September 27, 2020; it being the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21A) Text: Matthew 21:23-32

Today's Gospel story definitely needs some context. It takes place right after Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (the Palm Sunday story) and after his overturning the tables of the money changers in the Temple. Immediately after that event, he remains in the Temple and cures blind and lame people showing his mastery over all things and begins teaching any and all who enter the Temple.

With that as the context. Today's Gospel is about authority issues – have you ever known anyone with authority issues? Have you ever had any authority issues yourself? Authority is the theme that runs through today's Gospel passage. The chief priests' and elders take issue with Jesus' authority. The two sons challenge the authority of their father. And they are not the only ones that have authority issues.

Yes, I am talking about you and I am talking about me. We all have authority issues but maybe not in the way we think or understand them. In our usual understanding of authority, the question that today's gospel poses for Christians – poses for you and me – is whether we submit to and recognize the authority of Jesus and of God. But, to make that the question the gospel is asking reveals a basic misunderstanding of what true authority is.

More often than not, we understand authority to be based on credentials, on expertise, on a thick resume, on years of education and proven successes and accomplishments, on our status in society and our reputation. That means we are saying that authority comes from outside of us and authority is given to us by exterior circumstances. In this way of looking at things, we say that some people have authority and others do not. And we often have issues with them!

“Who do you think you are?” “What gives you the right to tell me what to do?” Or, to use a phrase I loved in my teenage years, “You're not the boss of me?” BTW, that never went over very well – especially with my mother. But, that's another story!

We don't like someone else telling us what to do or what to think. We don't like being corrected. And we can hear that attitude in the question that the chief priests and elders pose to Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” And we can see it in the refusal of **both** sons to go into the vineyard and work.

But, I think that there is another authority issue in today's Gospel. It is the failure and refusal to recognize, claim and exercise the authority that God has given all of us to go into the vineyard and to work for the kingdom of God.

If we think that God is the boss of us, we misunderstand authority. God is not the boss of you or the boss of me. Rather God is our creator – God is our author. Every day God authorizes each and every one of us to go into the vineyard, to act in

this world with authority, to act on behalf of God through the gifts that God has given each and every one of us.

True authority always comes from within. It is an interior and God-given quality, not an exterior circumstance due to our exalted position in the grand scheme of things. That is something that I believe that Ruth Bader Ginsburg understood – and that is why she always seemed to have so much authority and yet, never needed to “lord it over” people. That is why she and Antonin Scalia could be friends even in disagreements. And that is what the chief priests and elders in today’s Gospel did not understand.

I think that is why Jesus was always so exasperated with the religious leaders. They had chosen to exchange their God-given authority for human power, for political power. And that is what is happening increasingly in our world today.

In the absence of true authority, of leaders who see their authority as coming from their responsibilities in and to the world, there will always be power struggles. Look at the gridlock in our political system. Look at the wars in the world. Even, look at the conflicts we all have in our relationships. They are all about power, but not about authority. Our leaders, beginning at the very top, seek to exercise power, not authority. In exercising power, they look to their own interests rather than exercising authority by looking to the interests of others, the interests of the country and all its peoples.

Think about people who hold true, God-given authority for you. For me, they are the people who inspire me. They are the people who call forth from me faith, hope and trust. They are the people who expand my world, open me to new possibilities, bring forth in me life and gifts that I never knew were here. They are the ones who have caused me to reevaluate my life, change my mind and live differently. And, you know what, those people are a lot like Jesus and they are very different from those who have tried to exercise power over me.

I remember going to Janice Robinson’s funeral at Washington National Cathedral in 2012. She was a good friend and a person that had authority in my life for all the reasons I have mentioned above. And, when I went to that funeral, I proudly felt that I was a very important person in her life. And when I got to the Cathedral, I found that a couple thousand other people were also among the very important persons in her life. Why? Because she was a woman and a priest who had authority – not power – but authority. Her ability to be present, to guide, to lead, to listen were gifts that God had bestowed on her and that created space for me and so many others to work in the vineyards of our lives, our church and our society.

All authority originates in God, but it is not exclusive to God. God shares authority with us – it is the expression and manifestation of God’s life in and through our lives. Each and every one of us has authority. And it is God-given.

As a priest, I do not have more authority than you. I do not have better authority than you. I have a different authority.

This last Tuesday, we saw our own Kevin Antonio Smallwood ordained as a priest in the Church of God. As the bishop laid hands on him and I stood with other priests near him, I saw his authority change – not his power – but his authority. He now goes into the vineyard and today celebrates the Holy Eucharist not for himself, but for us so that we might come into the presence of Jesus Christ. It is a new authority, a new God-given, Spirit-given gift to him but for us. And that, by the way, is why no priest is ever allowed to celebrate Eucharist alone – it is done for the community, not for one person.

So as we hear this Gospel and welcome this new priest as one of us, let me push you again about your authority issues. What is the authority that God has given you? What gifts, what attributes has God bestowed on you? Are you living that authority and sharing those gifts? Are you going to the vineyard like the second son or simply mouthing the answers that you think God wants to hear like the first son.

Today, Jesus wants us to think about and celebrate authority as we do what he commanded us to do at the Last Supper. And he wants to remember that the purpose of what we do this morning is to strengthen us to do in the vineyard, in the world what God has authorized us to do – spread the kingdom -- the kingdom of peace, of justice and of love – even when it seems impossible.