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“Who Sez?”

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Some of you may have noticed that this week I seem to have broken my self-imposed rule to stick to the lectionary. I had to field the question more than once of why I chose to repeat last week’s gospel lesson. The fact is I do not intend to ignore this week’s actual lectionary passage, the so-called “parable of the wicked tenants.” But I am convinced that last week’s gospel lesson, “By what authority . . .,” is essential not just in the reading of today’s assigned passage, but for the entirety of chapter 21.

This chapter of the gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus telling two of his disciples to go into the village and take the first mother donkey and her colt that you come to. If anyone tries to stop you, just say the Master needs them. In other words, just tell them that the one who has the right of property to these animals is exercising that right. This is followed immediately by “the procession into Jerusalem” which we celebrate on Palm Sunday. Great

crowds proclaim that Jesus is the one who comes in the name of the Lord; in other words, the multitude are saying that Jesus has the authority to speak for God.

The chapter continues as Jesus enters the temple and throws out the moneychangers and dove sellers, the so-called “cleansing of the temple,” making room for the blind and lame to come to him there and receive healing. This direct challenge to the authority of the temple priests is the last straw, and they immediately begin conspiring to find a way to kill Jesus.

This is followed by one of the weirdest stories in all the gospels. Jesus comes to a single fig tree growing by the side of road on his way back into Jerusalem the next morning. Looking for a breakfast of figs and finding none, he curses the tree and the tree instantly withers. I wish I had more time here to delve into this story. The more disturbing they are, the more I like them. For now, it must suffice to say that the point of his curse is revealed when Jesus tells the disciples gawking at the suddenly withered tree that if they have faith, they can not only do this but that they can tell the mountains to rise up and throw

themselves into the sea. If only they have faith, and do not doubt.

I have said before that the Greek word translated here as faith, *pistis*, does not refer to a conviction that stands in courageous opposition to the facts, but a confidence built upon an accumulation of facts. I do not accept that Jesus is talking here about faith in one's own capacity to "tell a mountain where to go," or that he is suggesting that his message is about imposing one's will upon others. He is speaking of a confidence that the mountain, for reasons of its own, will do as it is told.

The next event in this chapter is the challenge Jesus receives from the chief priests and elders of the temple, last week's gospel lesson. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" But I will hold my comments on this while I skip to the next bit, the parable of the two sons.

Jesus asks the priests and elders about two sons, both asked by their father to work a day in his vineyard. One says, no, but changes his mind and eventually does go; the other says yes, but never does as he said he

would. Obviously, the one who ends up in the vineyard is the one who does his father's will. And for that son, the father has authority because the son obeyed. For the son who merely paid lip service to his father, the father had no authority. The proof of the father's authority is in the son's obedience.

Finally, we come to "the parable of the wicked tenants." Let me give it its due. The encounter with the chief priests and elders continues with a parable that directly references the Isaiah passage we heard in the Hebrew Bible reading a few moments ago. A landowner plants a vineyard, erects a fence, digs a wine press, and builds a watchtower. Then, in a narrative turn, Jesus has the landowner lease it to tenants and move to another country. When harvest time comes, the landowner sends his servants to collect the grapes, but the tenants either kill them or send them back empty-handed. In this telling, the grapes are not wild, the tenants are, but the hit to the landowner's bottom-line is the same. No grapes.

The landowner eventually sends his son who should be received with all the authority the father would, but the

tenants kill him in hope of usurping his inheritance. When Jesus asks the chief priests what the landowner would do to those tenants in response to their actions, they say, “He would put those wretches to a miserable death and give the care of the vineyard to someone else.” The landowner in this story must not necessarily be read as God, nor is the son necessarily read as Jesus, but this is a discussion for another time. The point is, as Jesus quotes from Psalm 118, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

If it is just read by itself, as the lectionary would seem to encourage, it sounds like a warning that we tenants had better return the yield of the vineyard to the landowner at harvest time, or else. Read in context, however, it becomes possible to see this story as a continuation of the previous story. See how the story changes when we see the son who is murdered by the wicked tenants as the son who obeyed his father and went to work that day in the vineyard? What does that have to say about authority, or the cost of obedience? Does the withered fig tree come to mind? I will leave that for you to think about.

As I have said, I think this whole chapter revolves around Jesus' teaching of the nature of true authority. When the priests and elders ask where he came by his, and who gave it to him, Jesus conditioned his answer upon receiving an answer to his own question. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" The priests and elders reasoned it out and had to say, "We do not know."

Of course, Jesus knew they were trying to trap him, but he turned the tables on them, and forced them to see that they were asking the wrong question, in fact, an unanswerable question. True authority does not come from heaven or from human origin, or perhaps it is better to say that, in the case of true authority, it is a gift from both in a way that one cannot tell where the divine ends and the human begins. Jesus is recorded as saying, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things," but I like to think he is misquoted. I can hear him say, "If you don't know, I cannot tell you."

Of the many crises we face these days, one of the greatest is a crisis of authority. We all seem to grasp after

the claim to authority so that we can impose our own ideas about how things should be. We seem to think winning a political election gives us complete authority over the losers. It is easy to think our set of scientific data gives us the authority to unilaterally call the other side wrong. We are frustrated and angry when, over and over, our supposed claim to authority is rebutted.

I think this crisis came about largely because western society, as much as it claims to be secular and rational, has taken for its own, a false understanding of Jesus' authority. First, the word translated as authority in the original Greek is *exousia*, *ex-* in the sense of coming out from something, as in *ex-hale*, and *ousia*, which is the word famous in philosophical circles that refers to being. Authority starts as an *ex-pression* of personal power, an essential capacity that cannot be separated from being. The notion that it is not present and active until bestowed by a greater power, be it earthly or divine, simply is not supported by the meaning of the word.

Second, authority implies a reciprocity between the one who orders and the one who obeys. If the order is not

obeyed or if its obedience is imposed by force, it is not the authority by which Jesus does what he does. The faith to move mountains, or wither fig trees, or send a son into a hostile vineyard is dependent upon the willingness of those who obey. Paul said, “If I have faith to remove mountains, but have not love. . .” That means love not only for the reason I might have for the mountain having to move but for the mountain itself, and for the new place that will soon have a mountain sitting on it.

Third, true authority, the authority which Jesus exercises, cannot be attributed solely to divine or human origin. In fact, the origin can be found at every point between the one who orders, the one who obeys, and any who lie in the path of that obedience. It respects the will, the native authority, of all, from the highest heaven to the lowest low, especially all the way down to a stone not even fit for a builder’s use. As Jesus says, it is that seemingly worthless stone that becomes the cornerstone, the foundation, upon which the exercise of authority must be based.



It is dangerous to assume that from our own perspective we are ever acting in the best interests of anyone else, a very good reason we can never lay claim to true authority, but, to the extent we can, we must try to include those interests in every decision we make. May God grant that we realize our own authority that is native to our God-given being, may God show us how to exercise that authority conscious that it is dependent upon the willful cooperation of all concerned, and may our authority always be subject to the true authority of God. Amen.