



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Pentecost 17
Proper 21 (A)**

Answering Jesus

[RCL] Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

The chief priests and the elders of the people were questioning Jesus. What did Jesus do to warrant the religious leaders’ questioning?

Today’s lesson did not tell us what Jesus had done. However, we could find out by looking back to the previous verses. The preceding verses tell us that Jesus entered the Temple in Jerusalem, where he drove out all who were selling and buying and overturned the table of the money changers. He cleansed the Temple. Jesus then cursed the fig tree, which withered at once. What Jesus did would not have pleased the priests and the elders; their question was most likely a reaction to what Jesus did. In a way, they were asking, “Who are you? How dare you?”

Jesus, the good rabbi, does not answer, but questions the questioners instead. Jesus asks them if the authority of John the Baptist’s baptism was human or heavenly.

What did John the Baptist’s baptism have to do with Jesus’ authority, you may ask. John the Baptist proclaimed God’s message in the wilderness, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2). The scripture continues to say, “Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matt 3:5-6). At the same time, some of the religious leaders sought baptism but were sternly condemned by John, who told them that, even as the offspring of Abraham, they needed to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Matt 3:8).

The chief priest and elders who were questioning Jesus probably were not the repentant ones. John had called them out, saying that even though they held the position of religious leaders, they were not obedient to God’s way. Thus, Jesus brings up John to remind them of their hypocrisy. These chief priests and elders did not want to accept or admit John’s authority came from heaven, nor did they want to say that it was from humans. They knew well that many people had accepted John’s message of repentance and did not dare to offend these people, so they said they did not know. So, Jesus would not answer their question,

either.

Jesus does not stop with the non-answering. It looks like he wants to give the religious leaders another chance by telling them a parable – that of the two sons. One did not want to go to work in the father’s vineyard initially but eventually did. The other son said he would go to work but did not. When asked which son did the will of the father, the religious leaders have no problem identifying the first son, who did the will of the father.

Jesus is putting up a mirror for them to see themselves. He makes the questioners see who they are – what they do and do not do. Would they be able or willing to see that, though? Jesus continues, in a straightforward manner, explaining that the tax collectors and prostitutes, once lost but now found, are following Jesus and will enter the kingdom of God before these so-called “religious men”.

We can see that it is easy to perform lip-service, but it is much harder to do the actual work of following God. These religious leaders seem pious, clinging to the laws, but not so much to action. Those considered lowly, the tax collectors and prostitutes, have changed their ways to follow. So, what made them change, and what kept these religious leaders from changing?

These are good questions for reflection. Jesus welcomes the tax collectors and the prostitutes and shares Good News with them. In turn, Jesus’ love for them leads them to believe in him. These once excluded people have thus changed. The religious leaders, with a mind to the hierarchy, want to maintain the status quo. The local rabbi, Jesus, and his cousin John, the prophet, are more popular than they are and seem to be challenging their ways of serving God’s people. Their desire to hold onto power, their arrogance, and their fear of upsetting the Roman peace block their way to see and accept the truth that Jesus’ and John’s authority comes from God.

It is always easier to see the splinter in another’s eye than to see the log in our own. How many of us attend church weekly or even more often, confessing our sins and affirming our faith through the creeds, but are not seeing – or are not willing to see – the injustices in our communities and countries?

The pandemic has turned our lives upside-down. We have been struggling to deal with the situation physically, mentally, spiritually, and economically. In times of difficulty and chaos, it is very easy to despair and fear. We can see it in Exodus. While the Israelites were led out of bondage from the Egyptians and were facing difficulty and challenge in the desert, they questioned and quarreled with Moses. Having lost faith and sight of God’s presence, they would rather be back in bondage.

Just like the Israelites, we all long to go back to the previous “normal” life. The truth is that there will be no “normal” life we once had. Things will be different. It appears that God is also holding a mirror to us in this pandemic. The mirror shows that COVID-19 and racial violence are mostly affecting people of color.

As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry wrote in the Washington Post on May 31, “We have strayed far from the path of love... I look at searing images of racialized violence across our country — against the backdrop of the disproportionate number of COVID-19 victims who are black, brown, and native — and I cannot help but notice love’s profound and tragic absence.”

Love is what God commands us to do; we are to love God and love our neighbors. The mirror shows us the absence of love and justice. Are we willing to see it and change it? Or do we prefer to maintain the status quo, going back to where we were?

Presiding Bishop Curry does not stop at pointing out the absence of love; he and his team ask us to join them on the path of love, on the journey of *Becoming Beloved Community*.

In this community, “as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, we dream and work to foster Beloved Communities where all people may experience dignity and abundant life and see themselves and others as beloved children of God.” Their vision is to “help us to understand and take up the long-term commitments necessary to form loving, liberating, and life-giving relationships with each other. Together, we are growing as reconcilers, justice-makers, and healers in the name of Christ.” Are we willing to take this path of love?

Jesus’ questioning is helping us to look at ourselves in the mirror. By answering it, we have to be willing to take the path of love, to unblock our sight, and to un-silence our voices to speak up and out about injustice, with love and truth. Amen.

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