

Sermon – Matthew 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-13  
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### “Empty Authority”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. As far as inspirational lines go, it’s hardly “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,” or “The only thing we have to fear is. . .fear itself.” Still, I doubt I’m the only one who’s ever said it in an attempt to motivate the skeptical and apathetic. I’m thinking of four well-used words, of course: “Because I said so.” These are the words of leaders without other options, of exhausted parents and boardroom bullies. I imagine I first said these words as a Bible camp counselor charged with motivating 7<sup>th</sup> graders to do, well, anything – a Sisyphean task if ever there was one. I try not to say these words to my kids because if the only reason to do something is because *I* think it should be done, I’m not even sure I’d be motivated to do it. These words are always spoken in response to a question, real or implied, along the lines of “Why should we?” Followed closely by, “Who put you in charge?”
2. The 7<sup>th</sup> graders in our text today are actually the elders and the chief priests. Jesus has been getting up to some good trouble since entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He’s accepted Hosannas from the crowds. He’s overturned the tables of the money changers, and with them the whole sacrificial system. He’s cursed a fig tree, just for good measure. The elders and priests, those who think they actually have authority, are more than skeptical; they are threatened, angry. How dare you do this? By what authority are you doing these things? But Jesus, the Word of God who is the author of authority itself,

the only One with the right to say, “Because I said so,” instead asks a question: Where did John’s baptism, John’s authority, come from?

3. I imagine Jesus would have given them a straight answer had theirs been an honest question. Instead, he could see the trap they were setting, and he sets one in return. The religious leaders, equally scared of the truth and the crowds, decline to commit. So, a parable. A father, two sons, and a vineyard. The man says to each, “Go.” The first says no but goes; the second yes but doesn’t. Which one of these did the will of the father? The leaders answer that it was the first son, and they are correct, at least to a point. Jesus never actually confirms or denies their answer. The fact of the matter is that neither fully did the will of the father, who surely willed that each son would have said yes, that each son would have actually gone to work. Both have sinned and fallen short. Still, in the final analysis, it is the one who goes in the end who does his father’s will. Who obeys. Who yields to his father’s authority. The parable lacks detail; we know neither why he said no nor why he finally went. We simply know that, in the end, *this son* did his father’s will, and *that one* did not. In this parable of judgment, it is a matter of stark choices. This isn’t Schrödinger’s vineyard; you can’t be in and out at the same time. Jesus’ point is clear: Whatever you’ve said or done up to this point, be you priest or prostitute, the time has come to heed the Father’s call and enter into the vineyard. Or not. But that’s on you.
4. The beautiful mystery of this invitation is that it is rooted in an authority that transcends any on earth, for it is the only power grounded in itself, dependent on nothing other than the very life of God from which it flows. Jesus does these things – Jesus invites, Jesus calls – based on nothing but the authority within himself. He need not appeal to a higher authority, for there is none higher. And yet, in the end, he does not stand there, finger wagging, saying, “Because I said so.” No, his authority is not so full of itself. It is downright empty.

5. There are few nights I remember as vividly as December 31, 2005. I had officiated two weddings that afternoon and had plans to celebrate the New Year with my girlfriend, Erika. Ostensibly headed to a family party, I picked her up and told her I had to stop by my apartment. She came up with me to discover flowers, champagne, and candlelight. She was confused, if only because I had told her that I was certainly *not* the kind of guy who would propose on New Year's Eve. But there I was, ring in hand, down on one knee, asking her to marry me. Up until that moment, our relationship had multiple possible outcomes. Maybe we would get married, maybe we wouldn't. But in that moment one future would come to pass while the other evaporated forever. Thank God – and I really do thank God – she said yes. But in that moment, a life-altering decision hanging in the balance, I did not claim power or make demand. I didn't say you have to do this because I say so. I didn't tower in power; I knelt in love, vulnerable to her answer.
  
6. Jesus, the author of life, does not claim our obedience through power. The answer he denies the elders and chief priests is given four days later when, bound and shamed, he is led up Calvary's hill and nailed to a tree. In the words of the Christ hymn quoted by Paul, he does not count his authority as something to be grasped but as something to give away. In a world in which leadership is ever more full of itself, Jesus empties himself. To get us to come into the vineyard of abundance and eternity, he comes before us, open and vulnerable. He dies. And he lives. He stands now before us again, inviting us to come in. Priests and elders, prostitutes and tax collectors, it matters not. His death makes our life possible. The gate to the vineyard stands as open as Christ's tomb. Will we see and obey the authority of his love, or will we walk away, trading salvation for our two-penny pride?
  
7. Wherever you've been, whatever you've done, up to this point, Jesus invites you in. He promises you a place. You barely even have to say yes; you just

have to not say no. Jesus stands before you again today. You have a place in his kingdom. Because he loves you. Because he died for you. And yes, because he, the very Word of Life, says so. It is *all* gift. Come on in. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.