Matthew 21:23-32

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’24Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.25Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?”26But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’27So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

**The Parable of the Two Sons**

28 ‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.”29He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went.30The father[\*](javascript:void(0);) went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go.31Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.32For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Today’s gospel lesson is a scathing critique directed toward the religious authorities – i.e. the us pastors. It’s my turn to be humbled by Jesus, so I hope to hear a few AMENs from the pews, *amen?*

The story begins with Jesus teaching in the temple, and the chief priests and elders come to him and ask him, “By what authority are you doing these things?” – “these things” refers to the things Jesus had done since coming to Jerusalem: first he arrived in town to a lot of hoopla and hallelujahs, then he drove out the moneychangers in the temple. All this was sure to get the attention of those in charge of the temple. Whether they had heard of Jesus before or not, they certainly felt an urgent need to know him now, with quite a few military authorities (i.e. Roman soldiers) looking on. Remember that the people who are asking Jesus are the religious “authorities,” the ones who set the rules, and Jesus didn’t seem to be doing a very good job of playing by the rules, driving the moneychangers out of the temple. And so it was with the priests and elders who came to see Jesus. These guys were the ones in charge of licensing, and based on his behavior the previous day, they were quite anxious to serve him with a “cease and desist” order before either the crowd or the Romans got out of hand.

Living in New York City we should all be quite familiar with the “authorities” and the concept of “authorization.” When the inspector from the fire department came in a few weeks ago and saw a small index card with some dates and initials taped to oven exhaust system in the kitchen, he wondered, *Is the person who inspected this device authorized to inspect exhaust systems?* When we go to a doctor, we get some comfort in seeing all those diplomas and degrees hanging on his office wall, because we get the impression that this person is authorized to examine your physical condition and to prescribe medicines, and when we go and pick up our prescriptions, we expect to see someone wearing a white lab coat at the pharmacy, someone who is authorized to fill the prescription. It’s true of auto mechanics and teachers, nurses and police officers, pilots and cab drivers. Even in the realm of religion, we look for certain qualifications in our priests and pastors, as well as some acknowledgement that the church we attend falls under the rubric of “Christian.”

The best way for a priest to stop Jesus was to challenge his authority. They were the ones who issued the papers, and they could just ask him to produce his papers, his credentials. Then it would be quite simple to shut down his operation, because the priests were the ones who had all the authority. If Jesus claimed that they had given him authorization, they could simply and honestly deny it: he hadn’t graduated from their academy. If he claimed his authority came from God, they could indict him as a blasphemer, and they had the muscle of Rome behind them.

Now there’s a funny thing that happens to some pastors. We often begin our career with a sense of calling, a sincere belief that God has “called” us to work for His Church. Then we go to seminary, and we learn all sorts of fascinating things, and we give sermons, and we study and write papers and take tests. And when it’s all over, we put on these nice gowns, and we attend a very formal ceremony and we get this big piece of paper with fancy lettering, and we feel all edumucated, and we get to be called “pastor.” If we continue our studies and get ordained we get to be called “reverend,” and if we get go even further we may get our doctorate, and then we can call ourselves something like “The Honorable Reverend Doctor Such-and-Such” and somewhere along the line we’ve forgotten that we servants of Christ: now, with such titles we are certainly religious authorities. And as authorities, we can a little defensive of our titles. As a pastor I need to ask myself just how much I have in common with the priests and the elders who came to ask Jesus, “By what authority to you do these things?” Am I just as envious of those who might challenge my power, just as jealous of any rival? Just as defensive?

And do you know how pastors defend their position, their power? The same way kings do; we say that our authority and our power come from God. In today’s Old Testament lesson we find Pastor Moses facing a doubting congregation, wondering if he really does represent a loving God or if he has just brought them into the desert to die. It’s a legitimate question for a congregation that is dying of thirst, whose future is in doubt. And Moses responds defensively, throwing God’s name into the mix: “Why do you quarrel with God?” They weren’t aware that they were quarreling with God: their beef was with Moses. But that’s the problem with religious *authority*; those who have the authority always claim that it comes from God, and they make this claim to protect themselves from those who would dare criticize or challenge their authority (sounds like I’m arguing my way out of a job, eh?). Somewhere along their faith journey, they lost either the faith in God or the will to obey Him, and now they’ve gone into business for themselves, guarding their positions with titles and “authority,” using God to serve their needs rather than focusing on serving God.

And what a mess it causes. When we lose our focus and stop seeking God’s will, we spend our time instead arguing with one another as to particulars, and we impress ourselves with our intellect, and we make lofty arguments as to whether indeed the spirit has weight or if God created the world in 6 days or 6 trillion years, and we claim that our beliefs are the correct ones, and nothing within us or around us changes, because the authorities (i.e. the pastors) have stopped doing the will of God.

That’s what the parable is about. A man had two sons. The son who says he will work in the vineyard represents the priests and elders, those who answer the call, but then get corrupted or distracted and start to believe that getting our theology down pat is the same thing as serving God. It isn’t, unless your theology *is* serving God. The son who said he would not work, then changes his mind represents the tax collectors and sinners, those who heard the message of John the Baptist and responded to his call of repentance. They repent, or *change their minds* and then they go and *do* what the Father requires, unlike the priests and elders who give lip service to God but when God calls them to do something, through his prophet John the Baptist, they do not respond.

And what is that service? It takes on many forms. It begins with coming together to worship God, to remind ourselves of who the boss is. Then it can be a friendly phone call to or email to someone who’s feeling down. It can be a thank you card for someone who has helped you. It can be knitting a stocking cap for a penniless child or fixing up a bathroom to make it a little more “user-friendly.” But whatever form your service takes, it’s never done for our own gain, not out of selfish ambition, but rather out of a profound love for God. It’s done, as Paul writes, “in fear and trembling” because it’s not always easy or convenient or safe to obey God’s will – ask Jesus. The reason we regress into inaction in the Church is because it is easy and convenient and safe. It’s much safer to argue the concept of predestination or the ordination of gay clergy than it is to humble ourselves, to regard others as better than ourselves, to sacrifice our time and resources for the benefit of others, to obey God to the point of death.

I’m challenged by Jesus to do more than preach a good sermon. I’m challenged to practice what I preach, to “put my money (or time or effort) where my mouth is.” To lead by such an example so that you would do as I do and not just as I say. I am so encouraged by many of you who I know give so much of their time and resources to those in need, who preach the Gospel with their hands. Let us all stick with the basics, responding to God’s love with love, that others will know from our actions that Jesus Christ is our Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:11)