

Says Who?  
Matthew 21:23-32

The passage from Matthew this morning comes near the end of the gospel. If you think about it this passage is from Chapter 21 and there are only 28 chapters. We are nearing the end of Christ's ministry on earth in the narrative. Because of the importance of the Passion of Christ and its link to the Jewish Passover, the lectionary's movement through the Gospel sometimes does not always proceed in an orderly fashion through the chapters. Advent and the birth narrative begins the new church year in the opening chapters, but the Passion and Easter come before we near the end of the year. We consider certain passages in association with events on the liturgical calendar. In ordinary times we examine Jesus' life and teachings as they are presented. Yet in between last week's parable about the laborers in the vineyard and the reading this morning within the narrative Jesus has entered Jerusalem accompanied by crowds shouting Hosanna and has gone into the Temple and overturned the tables of the moneylenders and merchants. Jesus then sits in the Temple courtyard for the rest of the day healing and teaching those who come to him. The chief priests and scribes watch what he is doing, hear the praises and honor being given to Jesus and become angry. This is part of the growing hostility which leads to the arrest of Jesus and the cross. At the end of this eventful day in Matthew, Jesus leaves the Temple, indeed he goes out of the city to Bethany, for the night. Today's passage begins on the next morning when Jesus re-enters the Temple and begins to teach those gathered there. This morning the chief priest and the scribes decide to confront Jesus about his actions which really have been challenges to their institution and their livelihood. After all, the doves that were being sold were to be sacrificed in the Temple to obtain forgiveness, and the moneychangers were there to convert the people's money into the form acceptable for the Temple tax—these were all things needed to support the Temple's function and were done based on the inherited traditions of the faith. Jesus has come in and drove them all out because he said the Temple was to be a house of prayer. I can just hear those priests muttering under their breath as they listen to Jesus, "Says Who?" After all, this man Jesus is not a priest—he is not a member of the tribe of Levi—just who does he think he is upsetting the things which have been in place since the Temple was rebuilt? He is not from Jerusalem, he is not a Pharisee trained in the Law, he is not even a scribe who is educated and has a role they understand. Yet here he comes into our place, our Temple and upsets it all. We are trained in the Law. We are members of the tribe of Levi to whom God through Moses gave the privilege and duty of the temple, of the keeping of the Arc of the Covenant and the maintaining of the rituals necessary to proper worship. Just who gives him this authority to make these proclamations and chase anyone from the Temple whom we sanction? With these thoughts in mind about their own credentials which justify what has been occurring in the Temple and the way they have led the people in worship, the scribes and chief priests approach Jesus as he his teaching. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" They are obviously expecting Jesus to name a mentor, someone human, someone who taught him the things he has been teaching; someone whose authority he is trying to use for what he has done. They believe anyone Jesus names is not going to have the degree of authority that they have. As the chief priests envision this contest, they feel that they and their actions will be vindicated. Who could possibly have more authority than they do? But what

they expect is not what they get. Jesus never does what the religious leaders expect. In this passage Jesus offers to tell them where his authority comes from **if** they answer one question for him. The question Jesus poses to the chief priests is this—“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” It is actually not unusual for Jesus to answer a question with a question, but here the result is very interesting. What happens in the passage is we are given a debate among these challengers of Jesus’ authority. The chief priests’ debate as recorded exposes their fears. They know if they reply that John’s baptism of repentance was a message from heaven—which was synonymous with being from God, with being a prophet, then they must defend why they didn’t believe John when John told them they must repent because the words of Isaiah were about to be fulfilled. In this encounter recorded in Matthew chapter 3, John warns them that they will not be favored just because they are “sons of Abraham” then identifies Jesus as the one who will come and “clean the threshing floor” when Jesus comes to him for baptism. Here they realize that they cannot admit to John’s identity as a prophet, for then his authority and Jesus’ both come directly from God. Yet because John and Jesus are so popular with the people, they fear the reaction of the people if they deny this God given authority. What a dilemma for these men who are so proud of their learning and their positions as leaders of the people. They realize neither option which Jesus has given them in his question is one that they can choose without endangering their positions. Thus, their reply is, “We do not know.” In many ways this reply is evasive, they avoid giving an answer. Actually for their own self-interest and self-justification they must believe that the answer is of human origin, but fear makes that impossible to say. How embarrassing to publically declare their ignorance. Jesus’ response to their non answer is to declare that “neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” Now this interaction between Jesus and the chief priests is often thought of as Jesus being evasive, as an example where Jesus does not claim his identity for fear of the consequences. It seems to me that although it is true that Jesus does not directly claim his identity as Messiah in this encounter, his response is not based on fear of the consequences for his angering the chief priests so thoroughly is what leads to his arrest later. Instead it seems to me that Jesus, by this question, has identified the source of his authority with John’s. They both carry a message from God—a message which the religious establishment has already refused to accept. If they acknowledge the divine origin of John’s authority, then they must acknowledge Jesus’ own divine authority. Jesus knows that telling them the source of his authority will not make them admit the truth of it, as it is a truth which will destroy their own authority. We know what the chief priests’ situation was, but the question now is what does this passage tell us about our own situation? Where do we place ourselves in this passage? How do we answer the question about Jesus’ authority? What is our answer to the teachings of Jesus? When listening to the how we are called to behave, do we respond with “Says who?” It seems that we often take the things Jesus said about how we are to act as if we are the ones in power who decide which of the teachings apply to us. After the chief priests gave their non-choice, Jesus then tells another parable: a parable about a father and two sons. In this parable we again have a vineyard where work needs to be done. The father, obviously the owner of the vineyard, requests that the first son go into the vineyard and work. He responds to the request by telling his father that he will not go. The father then goes to the second son with the same request. The second son agrees to the request but then he does not show up in the vineyard to work. At the end of the set up of

the situation, Jesus asks those around him, “Which of the two did the will of the father?” “They” answer: “The first.” It is not specifically stated who the “they” is who provide this answer, but it probably was the same ones who had just challenged Jesus’ authority. When they approached Jesus, he had been teaching so it might have been someone from this audience. Whoever it was, they got the answer right. But the point of the story was definitely directed at the chief priests and their followers for Jesus then proclaims: “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For 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.” When Jesus provides this explanation for the parable was this just an attack aimed at those chief priests? What does Jesus’ explanation tell us? It plainly tells us that it is not the words which we say which are important to God. Those religious leaders were known for their words, but were short on deeds. We hear from Jesus that the one who will enter heaven is the one who does the right thing, not the one who says the right thing. For Jesus, faith that doesn’t result in faithful action is mere talk. The truth of your commitment lives in your heart. What you actually do is the best measure of what’s in your heart. Unfortunately, it seems that often today that is where we live is more like the second son. Poll after poll and survey after survey which asks the general population with what do they identify Christians find the answer to be hypocrisy. Proclaiming one thing and doing another is often the view held of Christians. It is always very easy to say, Lord, Lord, but it is not so easy to do what the Father has asked of us. Jesus summed up what is asked in a very simple way: Love me and obey my commands where the commands are also summed up as love your neighbor as yourself. To Jesus, it was the showing up in the field that meant obedience to the father. Although the parable was directed at the religious leaders of his day, this parable is also directed at us. I looked for a particular hymn to use as our closing hymn this morning, but was unable to find it in either of the hymnals found in the pews. It is in the new Presbyterian Hymnal with two titles: *We are One in the Spirit* which is the opening line of the first verse and *They’ll know we are Christians by Our Love* which is the refrain. The theme of the hymn is the love of Christ for all humanity which finds expression in our actions toward one another—actions of walking with each other hand in hand, of working with each other side by side, spreading the news of God among us and guarding the dignity of all humankind. That is the obedience asked of us when we are sent into the vineyard of the Lord.

