

Matthew 21: 23-32 Authority and Obedience

The theme of the two Scripture passages read this morning relate to this dual topic, authority and obedience. Although I did not read the Exodus passage from today's lectionary selection, it is another one of those texts describing those complaining, whining Israelites in the wilderness—they have arrived at the next camp site only to find no water—and according to Moses' conversation with God—they are so angry, he is fearful they are about to stone him for leading them out of Egypt. God is patient and provides them with water—but it won't be long before they again come to Moses complaining. The key issue can be summed up with the last verse of this selected text from Exodus 17: when these newly liberated people ask this question: "Is the Lord among us or not?" The things they have witnessed have not convinced them of God's presence. During their time in the wilderness they enter into the covenant relationship which God initiates and offers them: They are to be God's people and they are to claim God as their only God and live according to those laws and ordinances they receive from God while in the desert. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of these ordinances which they fail repeatedly to use to govern their behavior. By the time of Christ these ordinances govern in legalistic detail every aspect of the life of the people. Our passage from Matthew comes during the last week of Jesus' earthly life. From that context you know that what Jesus is doing is not being accepted by those in authority. This scene places Jesus in the Temple, he has upset the apple cart so to speak by declaring those selling and doing money changing in the Temple courtyard don't belong in his Father' house of prayer. Jesus teaches and heals in that Temple courtyard. What he is teaching does not fit the established institutions ways of achieving righteousness. He challenges their legalist approach to pleasing God. The popularity of Jesus with the people threatens the status quo and their authority. The religious leaders of the Temple, the chief priest and the elders, are becoming increasingly upset by what Jesus is saying and doing as he gains popularity with the people. They are the established arbitrators of God's law. Authority belongs with them. As today's passage begins these leaders, approach Jesus and challenge him: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Since we know who Jesus is, we know why Jesus is doing these things—we know he has a better understanding of God's will as shown by his cutting through all the red tape of hundreds of ordinances so that you only need two—Love God with all your heart, mind and spirit; and love your neighbor as yourself. No need for elaborate purity rituals; no need to pay the Temple for having touched something "unclean". Jesus doesn't directly answer their challenge about the source of his authority. Instead, he says he will tell them, if they answer a question he asks. His question is about the baptisms which John did—did they originate in heaven or were they of human origin. Our text gives us a little debate among these leaders, as to what they should answer, but because of their fear—they did not give an answer. Instead

their response is that they do not know. When the next verses of the passage move to the parable of the two sons, it might seem like the question of authority has been shelved for a new topic about obedience. This parable tells a pretty straightforward story. There are two children—in this case sons—who are given an instruction by their parent—in this case, their father. Honoring or being obedient to one's parents is one of the basic commandments present in Jewish tradition since Exodus. It is also a cultural truism across multiple cultures and history. As it is widely understood and believed today that children should be obedient to their parents—that's just basic family structure when we get to the end of the parable we are pretty sure we know the answer to the question Jesus then poses. In the parable as told, the family has a vineyard and each son is told to go and work in it. One son tells his father he won't go, but later changes his mind and goes out and works in the vineyard. The other son says he will, but then fails to show up. Jesus' question is then, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" There is not debate amongst themselves here, they respond as we would: "The first."

Remember to whom Jesus is speaking—those who are the leaders of the faith—those who are the experts on the Law and what God's will is. Jesus' next comment must surely shock and offend them: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." He then goes back to the question he had asked about John—"for John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him." John had loudly called for the return to God, for repentance and a return to the truths embedded in the tradition—love God and neighbor. The general assumption about this parable and its placement at this part of Matthew's gospel is that it serves to highlight the heightened tension between Jesus and the religious authorities and to build the case against those same religious leaders for their failure: their failure to answer Jesus' question about John's authority, their failure to accept his message, and their failure to recognize in Jesus God's promised Messiah. It is surely meant as a criticism of those who are trained in what obedience to God's will should look like are not in fact, obedient. But there is also the possibility that within the parable we are offered a surprising word, and one of hope. In this parable there is the surprising possibility that someone who has refused to listen to God may yet change their mind like the first son did. Hope that it's never too late to respond to the grace offered in the Gospel. Hope that past actions or current status do not determine one's future. Hope that even those whom good folk—and remember that the chief priests and elders were the good folk—in many ways the first century equivalent of our church leaders—have decided are beyond the pale of decent society are never, ever beyond the reach of God. And Jesus picked as his examples of those going ahead of the "good folk" to belong to groups considered totally unacceptable. When we look around and judge the actions of others, when we proclaim they or their actions put them beyond the pale of acceptance, perhaps we should remember that God reaches out to all with the gift of acceptance. Love and forgiveness are the hallmarks of the kingdom which

Jesus proclaims. We live in a time of such division that we overlook the profound truth that we are all children of God—each one loved by God. We as the “good folk” of the parable, are called to love, to live hope-filled and purposeful lives of service to our neighbor—to seek to listen to God’s call for ourselves and for our community within Christ which welcomes those we might think are at the end of the line entering God’s kingdom, but because of their acceptance of God’s will may be nearer the front than we think. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.