

## The Challenge of Challenging

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?" 24 Jesus 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. 25 Did 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?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." 27 So 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.

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.' 29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 31 Which 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. 32 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 him.

*Simon Says Game.*

Simon says, "wave to the people next to you."

Simon says, "say 'Praise the Lord.'"

"Say, 'Amen.'"

Why did some of you NOT follow that instruction?

Simon says, "Double your offering today."

Why are some of you considering NOT doing that?"

The game Simon Says depends on recognizing and following authority. I appreciate the trust many showed in me and following my instructions even when I didn't use the "Simon says" authority. But notice, that recognition of authority also has its limits. At least I think we'll see that when we count today's offering. If only it were that easy, right?

Let's start with the context- Matthew places this story after the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem and the clearing of the merchants and bankers in the Temple. He also had cursed a fig tree when he was hungry and it had no fruit. When the tree immediately withered to the surprise of the disciples, Jesus told them that if they have faith and do not doubt, they can command a mountain to be lifted up and thrown into the sea.

Jesus was in the Pharisee's home court. Entering the Temple they were reminded all the ways he had challenged the authority of the religious "powers-that-be." This week's parade and all its drama was nothing new. The challenge had started with Jesus' association with John the Baptist. You will recall that when John was baptizing in the wilderness, he was nowhere near the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet people were flocking to him, to hear his message of repentance and recommitment, and to take their stand with him and his understanding of what God was doing in the world. He said something they longed to hear—that they mattered to God and could start fresh in the long awaited reign of God on earth. Even the religious leaders made the pilgrimage to see John, but we don't know if they chose to be baptized or were just scoping out the competition. He had harsh words for them—calling them a brood of vipers, a den of snakes. John showed the contrast between what the leaders said should be done and what they actually did themselves. From leadership of a family to a community to a region to a nation it is always easy to call for more than one wants to do on their own. But that's the power of healthy authority—we call each other to a higher way of living and encourage each other to strive together to achieve it while we humbly acknowledge our inability to do it on our own. The strong lift up the weak, and the weak find hope that life can be different. And as they grow stronger, they lift up the next generation to living closer to the commonly held dream.

The religious leaders of Jesus time, however, became so focused on strict observance of the laws and traditions that they imposed burdens on the populace, robbing them of hope, and profiting from their sin management system of Temple sacrifice. They let the past become a burden when a clear expression of God's kingdom was right in front of them. Little surprise that Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers and ran the animals that were for sale out of the Temple. He said that it was to be a house of prayer, not sacrifice for profit. And the leaders never admitted their own inability to live up to the rules they expected others to observe. Instead, they questioned Jesus' authority.

Failing to deal with Jesus' tough question about John the Baptist's authority, the religious leaders are left with a parable that tells a story about the kingdom and they squirm as they realize their place in the parable.

Two sons are asked by their father to go work in the vineyard. One says yes, but never leaves the house. The other says no, but later responds positively. Jesus asks which one did the will of the father? Of course, it was the one who got to work. Jesus links authority to the kingdom of God in this parable—and to the work one does for the realization of that kingdom. Parental authority is implied by the fourth commandment, where children are commanded to honor their father and mother. This would seem obvious to the religious leaders who loved rules and regulations. Obedience, doing what the father said, was the expected outcome. Jesus was speaking their language until he said, "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 him." How did they miss the kingdom of God?

The answer is as old as humankind. The big problem is our natural tendency to turn in on ourselves, to go from "we" to "me." And that is often manifested by our need or desire to control everything that happens around us. It gets unhealthy when we see our interactions with others as merely transactional—If you do this, I'll do that.

Pastor David Lose teaches the difference between law and gospel to help us understand this transactional approach to leadership. He says that Law shows up when we say if I do this, then God has to do that. (Notice who is in control—I am.) Gospel sounds like this: Because God has done this, then I can do that. (Gospel always starts with God's actions and is followed with my response.)

The religious leaders Jesus was speaking with wanted to control their environment and this spilled over into the lives of others. Their relationships were transactional—law driven—they had made a business of God and lost the relational connection with both God and God's people.

Jesus challenged and confronted them over that departure from what God had intended. At first it was just a few that dared to believe Jesus and what he taught about the kingdom of God. But now, three years after his baptism and first excursions into preaching and healing, his message was widely known and his followers extensive. What he taught about the kingdom was far from what those in power wanted. His did not accept that that was all people of faith could be and do. Because the religious leaders feared losing control, they refused to hear his message of a kingdom where little becomes much, where all are welcomed and their contribution to the community was valued and received. They saw life from a lens of scarcity, not adequacy.

Today we do well to encourage each other to live in this alternative kingdom, where “we” is celebrated and “me” is valued. In this kingdom those who are lost are sought, the silenced given a voice, the vulnerable protected and the weak are sheltered while the blessed bless others. Those in this kingdom are called to trust God and invest their energies in bringing more and more into the family of faith.

We may initially feel like saying “no” but sooner than later the Spirit touches our hearts and we know that we have something to do—the business of the kingdom—the care of individuals and the building of healthy compassionate community. We have to speak about this alternative kingdom and demonstrate its power so that it becomes more and more present. We issue a dissenting report so that we, with those around us, are drawn deeper and deeper into it.

The late Ruth Bader Ginsberg, may her memory be a blessing, is quoted as saying, "Dissents speak to a future age. It's not simply to say, 'My colleagues are wrong and I would do it this way.' But the greatest dissents do become court opinions and gradually over time their views become the dominant view. So that's the dissenter's hope: that they are writing not for today, but for tomorrow."

Early in his ministry, those who heard Jesus were drawn to his teaching because he taught as one who had authority, not as the scribes and Pharisees. Those who teach the kingdom as Jesus taught it are given this authority even today, that's you and me. We have a sacred responsibility to use it and encourage our leaders at all levels to use it, too.

Simon says, “Go in peace, as proclaimers of the good news of the kingdom.”  
And I hope you can say, “Thanks be to God.”