

Beyond the Religious Establishment

Matthew 21:23-32

September 25, 2011

²³When 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.

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 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."

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I'm not sure Jesus would make it as a pastor.

Sure, he would be qualified in terms of his understanding of scripture, his compassion for the sick, his sacrificial living, and his ability to preach and live the gospel. What I'm not sure about is how Jesus would handle the more delicate, interpersonal parts of what it means to be a leader in the church.

Jesus has some problems with authority. Specifically, he has some major problems with the religious establishment. And we're not just talking an under-your-breath kind of complaint. We're talking about turning over tables, and running people out with a whip of cords. We're talking about walking into the pulpit, uninvited, to preach an alternative message to what the session and Senior Pastor have authorized.

That's what this little story from Matthew's gospel is about. Jesus just walks into the temple, without permission, without credentials, without regard to authority, and tradition, and the consequences...and begins to preach and teach.

Well, you just don't do that. This is the temple. There are rules. There are expectations. There is an image to maintain...and there are standards about who can and cannot assume leadership.

Pastors know this kind of stuff. Especially established pastors – people who have earned their stripes and have gained experience leading the church. And, we know that being established gives us and our churches a sense of pride; of satisfaction; of importance.

Jesus really didn't care about those things. His concern was not for the reputation of the Religious Establishment. He cared less about *decently and in order*, and more about what the people of God were doing as they lived out their faith.

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Here's a little something to know about Matthew's gospel. The people to whom Matthew wrote, the earliest Christians, had just been kicked out of the Jewish Temple because of their unorthodox beliefs about the

resurrected Christ. They were a small minority who were struggling to forge an identity. They were the little guy; the underdog.

Matthew was originally written for a church who would have loved to hear about Jesus sticking it to the big bad religious establishment that had just kicked them out of the community of faith.

The story opens up with the chief priests and the elders circling; asking Jesus a question: “By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?”

But, Jesus (and those in Matthew’s church) knew that this question wasn’t really about authority. It was about control. About the establishment’s fear that they were losing it and the anxiety that Jesus was getting it. It was a question in response to the teaching and preaching of Jesus about the Kingdom of God (teaching that came from the same Bible they read!) that called the community beyond the boundaries of the status quo; teaching and preaching that called the people of God to participate in the new thing that God was doing in the world – in ways that would lead to transformation.

So in response to this question about authority, Jesus did what he often does: he told a parable; a parable to expose the empty rhetoric of these religious leaders who were more concerned about image than results; more concerned about looking the part than living the part.

“What do you think?” Jesus said. There were two sons who were asked by their father to go into the vineyard. The first said no, but then he went. The second said yes, but then he did not go. Now who did the will of the father?

Well, if we were in Matthew’s church, we might have cheered when we heard those establishment types hang their heads and mutter, “the first son.” Obviously, Jesus had just equated those established folks with the second son...the one who talked a good game but had nothing to show for it.

In one deft move, Jesus proved that the authority of those establishment-types was nothing more than show; it did not bear the fruit of the kingdom; and it paled in comparison to the authority God had given Jesus.

If we were one of those people in Matthew's church, we would be feeling pretty good. Matthew's church was full of first sons like the one in the parable...people who didn't fit the mold, who were not the established-types, but who had responded to the kingdom that Jesus ushered in and who were busy working in God's vineyard.

Yes, if we were in Matthew's church, we would be feeling pretty good...we might even get comfortable with our role as the underdog; as that first, righteous, son.

Until one day, we might wake up and find out that time had passed. We might wake up to realize that we were no longer the underdog, but, in fact, that we had become the religious establishment. And all of a sudden, Jesus' parable turns on its head. As Tom Long points out, "Now, the church [could be] in the role of the second son. [We've said yes to the invitation of the father] but [are we] actually showing up for work in the vineyard? [Are we] doing the peacemaking, mercy-granting, justice-seeking work of the kingdom?"¹

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What do you think?

I received some advice this week from a good Methodist. He suggested that each congregation ask itself a question – a kind of “ministry audit” – at the end of each year around stewardship time. The question is: *if your church closed its doors today, who would miss it other than your members?*

I can think of a number of people: the Alcoholic's Anonymous group that meets in the CE building; the children, youth, and parents who benefit from the work of Volunteers for Youth Justice, the homeless men and women who gather for a meal at the Hope for the Homeless house, the members of our community who come here for Taize and for our Advent Noonday Noels, people in the city who attend our University of First Presbyterian programs, seminary students around the country who study because of scholarships from our congregation, the desperately poor of Bangladesh who receive care from our missionaries Les and Cindy Morgan, the village of Dzuwa in Malawi, Africa whose field we helped irrigate, youth who attend the Mo Ranch conference center in Texas, clients of the Presbyterian

¹ Long, Tom, *Matthew* (Westminster Bible Companion, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) p. 244.

Children's Homes and Services – and organization that works hard to keep families together in the home...

I am grateful, and maybe even sinfully proud, that we have good answers to that question – but it's always important to keep asking it. Especially for churches that have been doing church for a while - churches like ours who do have a reputation; churches like ours who are well regarded in the community; churches like ours who are established.

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This week I sat on a panel discussion with someone who was pretty down on the established church. He poked fun at how uptight we were, and offered some pretty strong critique about whether established church folks could actually live out the kind of life that Jesus had in mind when he preached about the Kingdom.

I've heard that kind of criticism before. So have you. That all the church cares about is preserving itself. That the church is like a country club. That the church is too careful to really be about what God wants it to be about.

I sat there - in my pleated khaki pants and my lightly starched oxford shirt - and listened to the criticism again this week; listened to this person encourage those in the audience to be "spiritual but not religious." And I almost felt defensive...

But what I now feel is grateful for the warning. Because I know that God founded the church for a reason - and set Christ as its head. And sure, we can run the risk of living only for ourselves. Sure, we sometimes deserve the criticism of being more worried about the status quo than the Kingdom of God. It is good to be reminded of this possibility so that we can avoid it.

Yet, there is no doubt that God calls all kinds of churches...even established, traditional, wear-your-Sunday-best, put-on-your-robe churches like ours...to show up for work in the vineyard.

Our challenge is to just keep on listening beyond the place where we are comfortable so that our "yes" to the calling of God will continue to be followed up by action.

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