

***By What Authority?***  
**A Sermon on Matthew 21:23-32**  
**Proper 21**  
**September 27, 2020**

**Introduction**

Christian theology in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century tried to consider what role it played in the Holocaust. We call it post-Holocaust theology. One of the questions it asks is, How do we responsibly interpret texts that appear to demonize the Jews and Jewish leaders?

Chapter 21 is the beginning of Matthew's Passion Story, and the chief priests and the elders of the people are the ones who conspire to arrest Jesus and kill him. Matthew wants to show that the crucifixion was not just an unfortunate misunderstanding. It was the result of plotting of self-serving men of ill will. Through the centuries Christians used texts like these to blame the Jews for killing Jesus.

Applying a post-Holocaust lens can make it hard to find good news in today's text. It would be easy to skip this text because it seems offensive to modern sensibilities. We should be grateful to the Lectionary for forcing us to confront this text. Good news is worth digging for.

**First Move: A Controversy Dialogue**

The first half of today's text is a controversy dialogue. This is a common literary form in the Gospels. Jesus takes a controversial action and is confronted by religious authorities. Here the dialogue takes place in the Temple the day after Jesus turned over the tables.

The chief priests and the elders of the people are presented as if they are a single character. They ask, "By what authority do you do these things, and who gave you this authority?" "These things" refers to turning over the tables, proclaiming that the Temple is becoming a den of robbers, and healing the blind and the lame.

Jesus responds to their question with a question. We must remember that Jesus was a Jew. It was a rabbinic tradition to answer a question with a question or with a parable. Here, Jesus answers with both.

New Testament scholars doubt that this text reflects an actual dispute between Jesus and the religious leaders. It fits Matthew's story line too well.

Rudolph Bultmann, one of the giants of New Testament scholarship in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, points out that stories like this may still reflect the way that the historical Jesus talked. He says:

It can hardly be doubted that Jesus did teach as a Rabbi, gather disciples and engage in disputations. The individual controversy dialogues may not be historical reports of particular incidents in the life of Jesus, but the general character of his life is rightly portrayed in them.

The historical Jesus may have jostled in the Temple with opponents whose names are not recorded. We have to remember that the great mass of the Jewish people rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Where the historical relationships were no longer known, the church conceived of Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees and high priests as typical opponents of Jesus.

Jesus' opponents try to trap him with a question about authority. They have authority over the Temple, and they believe they are justified in asking him. The people have recognized Jesus as having divine authority, and the chief priests and elders want to disabuse them of that belief. If Jesus says that his authority comes from God, he would be making a public claim to Messianic status, which could be viewed either as blasphemous or as violating God's intent to reveal the Messiah himself. If Jesus says that his authority comes from men rather than God, he would be contradicting his own bold behavior.

It is a clever question, but Jesus proves to be more clever. Jesus asks a question that raises a similar dilemma if it is answered: "From where was the baptism of John? From heaven or from men?" The high priests and the elders of the people ponder among themselves and recognize that there is no good answer.

They respond, "We do not know." Jesus says that if they cannot answer his question, he will not answer their question.

Jesus is aggressive in these debates and that might seem to contradict the nonviolence that he preaches. Bultmann simply says: "It is quite impossible any longer to suppose that Jesus used to engage in harmless debates." I am a lawyer. I like to argue. I argue with my lawyer friends. It doesn't mean I have any ill feelings toward them. Jesus was a rabbi. Jesus liked to argue.

The stakes were high. From Matthew's post-Easter perspective, it concerns the dispute in Judaism about who were the authoritative teachers for the reconstitution of the people of God in the aftermath of the war and destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

Jesus follows up his question with a parable about a man who had two sons. He approaches the first son and tells him to go work in the vineyard. The son dishonors the father to his face by saying that he refuses to go. He later changes his mind and goes. The Greek word for change of mind does not carry a sense of sense of being regretful for your sins, which is what we think of as repentance. The second son said he would go to the vineyard, but he does not go.

Jesus asks, “Which of the two did the will of [the] father?” The answer is obvious. The high priests and elders of the people have been trapped; they pass judgment on themselves by choosing the first son. Jesus says, “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, but you saw and did not change your minds later to believe him.”

## **Second Move: A Process Hermeneutic**

One tool that can help us in struggling with difficult texts is a process hermeneutic. It is a way of interpreting Biblical texts that is consistent with process theology.

Ronald Farmer, a New Testament scholar, describes a process hermeneutic as paying special attention to those texts that are inconsistent with our worldview. We are tempted to reject texts that contradict our beliefs. Part of the problem with extreme partisanship today is that people reject facts that they don't like.

Farmer encourages us to sit with the text. See the text as a contrast rather than a contradiction to our beliefs. Contrasts give intensity to life. They keep life from becoming routine and predictable.

The goal is to hold a text that is foreign to our sensibilities in contrast with our own beliefs. We hope that this tension will produce a novel pattern that is large enough to include both the foreign and the familiar in a harmonious contrast. We are not abandoning our old beliefs. We are open to new propositions that expand our perspective.

The process hermeneutic sent me back to Bultmann to try to salvage the text. Bultmann says the church cast its foundational beliefs in the form of the controversy dialogue.

Today's text concludes with the proclamation that the tax collectors and the prostitutes will go ahead of Jesus' jousting partners into the kingdom of God. Tax collectors and prostitutes were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Prostitute is a translation of the Greek word, πόρνη, which means one who commits sexual depravity. The understanding of sexual depravity can change over the centuries.

A few years ago it would have meant LGBTQ folks in the eyes of a lot of conservative Christians. Today it might mean black and Latinx trans women; violent attacks against them have been increasing.

This is the answer to the original question, “By what authority do you do these things?” Jesus takes a roundabout way of answering to offer his vision of the kingdom of God. That is a more detailed answer than simply saying, “By God’s authority.” Jesus tells the people what kind of God he believes in. John Dominic Crossan says, “You believe in God, great, that doesn’t tell me much. What kind of God do you believe in?” Jesus says: a God who welcomes tax collectors and prostitutes into the kingdom first.

### **Third Move: Challenging Conversations**

Every day we hear talk about a civil war. The country will still be divided after the election, no matter who wins. One conservative friend of mine says that America needs to divide into two or three countries, separating the red states from the blue states.

We can apply the principles of the process hermeneutic to our conversations with friends we disagree with.

Try to get deeper than the talking points that both sides have. Ask your friend for their vision of the kingdom of God. In secular terms that means, what is your vision of America?

Recently I have read two thick books on conservative principles by George Will and Andrew Bacevich. I find that I agree with them on some of the core conservative principles: respect for tradition, the need for personal morality and ethics, humility about the possibility of reform, belief in transcendence, belief that government functions best at the lowest possible level. Will and Bacevich are calling for conservatives to reorganize around these principles, among others.

If we can talk to our friends about principles, we may find some common ground that we can agree on. We may have a good enough conversation that we can stop thinking about each other as crazy people.

We have to have some guardrails on our conversations. You don’t have to submit to verbal abuse. Personal attacks are off limits. I rarely unfriend people on FaceBook, but if someone personally attacks me or bullies me and won’t back off, they qualify.

Be realistic. You are not going to convert them, and they are not going to convert you. A simple acknowledgment that the other person has a point is a good start.

Trey Gowdy, a retired Republican Congressman from South Carolina, recently appeared on a cable news show. He said that in his eight years in Congress he never saw one person in either party change their mind. That is a stunning indictment.

We have to listen to people who have perspectives different from our own.

CeCe Jones-Davis set up two community discussions at our church in the last year, one was on community grief about the shooting of Isaiah Lewis, a black teenager in Edmond who was shot and killed by the police last year. The other was a town hall by three officers from Oklahoma City and Edmond Police Departments. We got to hear very different perspectives on the issue of race and police.

One of those officers, Tim Dorsey, Deputy Chief of Edmond PD, invited me to a prayer meeting for George Floyd in June. I was skeptical about going, I was afraid I was going to hear a lot of prayers for blue lives, but I went. I wanted to deepen the relationship. I was pleasantly surprised by the rally. It was attended by about 100 people and most of the speakers were black ministers. Most of the prayers lifted up the cries in the black community for justice.

I had coffee with Officer Dorsey this week. It was a good conversation; I listened more than I talked.

I asked him how policing had changed since the virus. He said that traffic stops are way down. They are only stopping people if they are driving dangerously. Arrests are down because activity is down. Domestic calls are up; people are spending more time at home together and some of them don't get along. Shoplifting is way up. A criminal justice reform bill that was adopted by the voters two years ago raised the felony limit for theft to \$1,000. Stores have a policy that employees are not to get physical with shoplifters. They call police, but the shoplifters often run. Police are reluctant to chase someone for a \$100 pair of sneakers. Too many things can go wrong.

I was a strong supporter of the criminal-justice reform bill. The bill was intended to reduce the prison population for nonviolent crimes. An increase in shoplifting was a consequence I hadn't foreseen.

We talked about police reform. Officer Dorsey said that his officers want to wear body cameras. They feel that they protect them. Edmond has furnished body cameras to about half of its officers. It is a funding issue—they cost about \$800 apiece. The rest of the force will get them soon.

Officer Dorsey also said that they would love to have mental health professionals to send on mental health calls instead of police officers. They are trained and can handle the situation better. The police are called for too many things that are not police matters. Again, it is a funding issue.

A big problem is that it is difficult to discipline officers under collective bargaining agreements. Wade Gourley, the Oklahoma City Police Chief, said recently that 90% of the officers he fires get reinstated through arbitration. Officer Dorsey said that officers will file a grievance for any discipline, whether it be a writeup, a warning or reprimand, let alone a firing. It doesn't cost them anything to file a grievance, so why wouldn't they file?

Officer Dorsey said there have been seven protests in Edmond. They are willing to meet with the heads of the protests beforehand to hear their complaints. He called Sheri Amore, lead organizer for Black Lives Matter in Oklahoma City. She spoke at our community grief session. She said she didn't know who was organizing the protests.

I appreciate the anger and grief over the grand jury's decision not to charge any officers in the killing of Breonna Taylor in Louisville. I am concerned, though, that the protesters and the police are not talking. People don't agree on what the facts are. I hope that the tragedy will bring about reforms that will prevent future tragedies like this one. Stop issuing no-knock warrants. Stop serving warrants in the middle of the night.

## **Conclusion**

Challenging Biblical texts can help us to deepen our understanding of the Bible and enrich our theology. Conversations with people who have a different perspective from our own give us a fuller understanding of reality. These texts and these conversations can be difficult, and we may want to avoid them. If we want to challenge an unjust status quo, we will seek them out.

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