

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2023
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Philippians 2:1-18
Matthew 21:23-32

God looked and saw that it was not good for the man to be alone. So the Creator of heaven and earth caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. Whilst Adam slept, the Ruler of the Cosmos opened up a place in the man's side and extracted a rib from which the Giver of life created Eve, the magnificent. Upon waking, Adam, overwhelmed with gratitude, keenly appreciative of his life's enlargement, feasted his eyes upon his bride and spoke to God: "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?"

Israel was pinned against the Red Sea. A malevolent host was bearing down upon them with unholy violence raging in their hearts. The people of Israel cried out to the Lord. Their cry was laden with fear, despair. God instructed Moses to have the people move forward and that Moses should lift up His staff. Miraculously, the Red Sea parted, providing an escape for God's chosen people. Upon seeing this marvel, the people lifted up their voices to heaven: "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?"

The eternal Son of God, the One in whose flesh dwells all the fullness of the deity, comes to the Place of the Skull. In humility, He is stripped of His clothing. Dark red stripes are etched across His body. A crown of thorns silently mocks His claim to be a king. Blood streams out of His wounds and pools on the ground as He is crucified. He is bearing the sins of the world. He is suffering. He is paying the price. He is obedient to His Father. A statement intended a challenge ironically captures the question every Christian must answer looking at Jesus on a cross: "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority."

The religious rulers are blind in their unbelief and they confront Jesus, who is teaching in the temple. If I were to translate the Greek into a rough, playground vernacular it would sound something like this: "Hey bub, just who do you think you are and where to do you get off doing what you're doing?" That is *exactly* the spirit behind these words: "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?" Why are the religious leaders hacked off? Does it even matter why? In mere days these same so-called leaders will be doing everything in their power to have Jesus crucified. "By what authority are you doing *these things* and who gave you this authority?" What *things* had Jesus done? Well, let's see, He fed 5000+ people with supplies that wouldn't satisfy two hungry boys. He had cured the leprous, made a paralytic walk, given sight to the blind, raised Jairus' dead daughter, raised the widow of Nain's dead son, and raised dead Lazarus. And the religious rulers are hacked off. Oh, yeah; Jesus turned over the money changers' tables in the temple courts and told them not to turn His Father's house into a den of thieves. Just where do you get off in doing what you're doing?

Man is a cheeky creature. Irreverent, defiant; fallen man is bent on following his own agenda and someone, *anyone*, stepping in the way of those desires has a bull's-eye drawn on them real quick. God brings His good things to us – life, salvation, hope, forgiveness, truth, holiness, mercy, love, heaven – and impudent man juts out his jaw and engages in a petty power struggle. "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?" Does your

Creator having a legitimate right to tell you what to do and not to do? Does God have a right to convict you of sin? Is He, and He alone, just in defining right and wrong? When the Lord Christ tells you to turn the other cheek, do you respond like Jesus' antagonists? Isn't your behavior sometimes akin to that awful question? When Christ says to keep yourself chaste, to defend the weak, to put the best construction on your neighbor's behavior, to forgive as you have been forgiven and we cast those commandments aside we're implicitly saying: "By what authority are *you* telling *me* what to do and who gave you this authority?" Yep, you're a sinner. Just like me, you're a sinner – thought, word, and deed.

Those religious rulers were sinners – not too different from the ones following Christ. Jesus wants them to see it. That, my friends, is mercy. The chief priests and the elders of the people didn't think that they needed a Savior. They were saving themselves by their pristine behavior. Only problem is that their behavior was a wreck. They had deluded themselves into believing that they had kept God's law. They thought that they didn't need a righteousness outside of themselves (Latin: *extra nos*) because they were so pure in act, pure in every way. Is that what you think about yourself? Mercy; Jesus shows them mercy. He pins them in a corner. John's baptism; the self-righteous had rejected it. They didn't need to repent. They didn't need to be cleansed. They didn't need a new heart, a divinely constructed renewal. Prostitutes and tax collectors RAN to John to be baptized. Grace had seized their souls and the Jordan River was full of sinners who relished a forgiving God. Jesus asked the religious elite about John's baptism and those ole boys were stuck. Jesus was trying to make them aware of their spiritual problem and they were interested only in their reputation.

Do you know what they did to maintain their reputation? They lied. John's baptism; was it from heaven or from man? That's what Jesus asked them. They lied. They replied, "We don't know." The truth would have exposed them as frauds, milking the crowd with their religious platitudes that was no more than legalistic twaddle. Christ taught with authority. Everyone knew it. He speaks the truth because He is the truth. No games, no side-hustle, no bait and switch, no Madison Ave. marketing campaign to raise His profile – just God's sublime truth. In 2000 years, what has changed? The beauty of the church is that NOTHING has changed. Seriously, nothing; tax collectors and prostitutes are still washed in Christ's blood. God burns off the filthy rags of our self-righteousness by showing us we have none and then He clothes us in the glorious raiment of Christ crucified and risen. None of us have behaved well. We've failed and failed and failed. And God redeemed us. God has sanctified us. Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit have given us a new heart and new life.

Jesus told those unrepentant religious rulers a wonderful parable. Two sons; their old man tells them to go work in the vineyard. The first tells his dad to "sit on it" but afterward, he actually goes into the vineyard as his father desired. The second son is all talk; "sure thing, pops," but he doesn't get anywhere close to the vineyard. Simple question: "which of the two did the will of his father?" The first one. Okay, so those people who were gross public sinners were living like someone defiantly mouthing off to their father. Ah, but when John the Baptist came around and called them to repent, they came into the vineyard, the Kingdom of Christ. They repented of their sins and embraced the Son of God and His righteousness. The second son are those who appear faithful to God but in reality are all about themselves, their pompous religiosity. They

reject God's Son and thus they reject the vineyard, the Kingdom of Christ. That must never be us.

Jesus has the authority. We bend the knee to Him and gladly confess His righteousness. He had the authority to lay down His life and to take it up again. We confess His righteousness. He has the authority to give us His body and His blood and through this means of grace we embrace the King of the vineyard. The Ten Commandments? Those are the very words that frame our life with God and our neighbor. The Ten Commandments are His authoritative word. God can and will convict me of my sin. God can and will call us to repent. Jesus is the Son who was told to go into the vineyard and lay down His life. He went. He came to us and died. Our Creator redeemed us from sin and death by dying on a cross. He has the authority to save us. He sanctifies us and calls us His own. Thanks be to God, Christ the King has endless authority.