

Philippians 2:1-13 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Before we hear today's gospel reading I want us to find our bearings in Matthew's story. We'll be reading from the second half of chapter 21. That chapter seems to tell the story of two days in the last week of Jesus' life. On the first day Jesus rides into the city on the back of a donkey—we hear some version of that story on Palm Sunday each year. The way that Matthew tells the story, Jesus then goes straight to the temple, where he makes quite a scene. He overturns the tables of those who are exchanging money and selling doves for sacrifice, he welcomes and heals folks who are blind and lame, and he seems to revel in the songs and praises of children. Then he leaves and goes to spend the night outside the city.

The following morning he re-enters the city walls. We pick up as he returns to the temple on this second day.

Matthew 21:23-32 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?”* 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. 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?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.”* 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.”*

[Jesus went on:

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 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. 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.”*

“By What Authority?”

Every once in a while my son Nate forwards a youtube video to his dad and to me. Since he knows us well, his choices are usually right on target.

This week he sent a video of a conversation between three children, who seem to be about three-years old. Two of the children are girls, and look like identical twins. The third child is a boy. The video begins with the little boy asserting that it is sprinkling outside. The initial charm of the video is his pronunciation of the word *sprinkling*, but the video quickly heats up when one of the twins counters, “No, it’s raining.” The two children go back and forth a surprising number of times with these same claims, but as the emotional stakes in the argument rise, they begin to bolster their cases by leaning on the most reliable authorities they know: the little boy saying, “*My mom says that it’s sprinkling, not raining.*” And the little girl countering “*My mommy says it’s raining.*” At one point, when the boy seems to be rather overwhelmed by his opponent’s confidence, he says quietly, “*You’re not real. I’m real.*” And then the argument resumes. Meanwhile the other twin stands between them, quietly advising them to “*stop, stop*”, or to “*say sorry*” when their thrusting fingers make actual physical contact. Finally, this peacemaker takes the helm, saying “*Watch, we are going to go out there and see.*” To which the little boy responds that they can’t, because it’s raining.

There is a pregnant pause while everyone realizes that he has just conceded the argument to his opponent.

When the assertive twin realizes that she has won, she places her finger against his chest and says, “*because it’s raining*”

At which moment the boy recoils from the whole experience, saying “Ow, you poked my heart. You poked my heart.”

So much human experience in a two-minute video.

It makes me wonder what you and I look like in our unguarded moments.

It makes me wonder what the scene Matthew described for us today would have looked like if someone in the first century had whipped out an I-phone and started recording.

My guess is that the religious leaders' faces would look absolutely stunned. How was it that this un-credentialed, itinerant preacher, whose face they barely knew, would dare to disrupt life in the city and worship in the temple, with his outburst of anger, his radical teachings, and his encouragement of blasphemous songs. The leaders have two closely related questions they need to ask Jesus: *By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?*

We need to remember here that every aspect of the community's life could be traced back to the temple, and the temple operated under clear lines of authority. By disrupting temple practice, Jesus is calling all of those assumptions into question. So the leaders can hardly be blamed for asking Jesus: *By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority? Who gave you the right?*

Jesus says he will answer their questions only if they will answer his first. And his question touches a sore place in Jerusalem's experience. Jesus dares to bring up the name of John the Baptist, who by this time is dead, having been imprisoned and be-headed.

Jesus asks the leaders: *Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?*

Jesus wants to know if they will acknowledge that God moves outside the temple structure. Was it God's power at work in John out in the wilderness, or was that only a popular fad, a misguided craze? Was John *real*?

Jesus' question puts the leaders in a difficult place. On the one hand they are not willing to ascribe John's ministry to God; on the other hand, they don't want to upset the crowds, who were powerfully impacted by John's witness. So the leaders say they don't know the answer to Jesus' question. They stick to the sidelines, so Jesus has to try another approach in order to engage them.

Rather than answering their question about authority, Jesus tells them a parable, which he prefaces by asking them "What do you think?"

On the face of it, it's such a simple parable: "A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second son and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go."

It's simple...until we try to find our place in it.

The first son clearly stands against his father's instruction. His is not a relationship of obedient response. He *says* he will not go.

But neither is the second son's relationship one of obedient response—though he is not nearly as up-front as his brother—for this second *says* that he will work in the vineyard, he just doesn't show up. It *appears* that this second son will be the obedient one, but, in fact, it is his openly rebellious brother who changes his mind and shows up first for the work that needs doing.

Things are not what they seem in either son's life. Jesus says we can't judge by appearances—things aren't settled for any of us by the histories that lie behind us.

It seems clear that Jesus is inviting the religious leaders to see themselves in the son who publicly says yes, but then fails to show up. So there's judgment here, yes, but there's also grace, because this is not a story told *about* the leaders; it's a story that's told *to* them. It's an invitation to turn around, to live a different way, to see things from a different perspective, even at this late date.

It's like the little girl in the video who says: "*Watch, we are going to go out there and see*" even as her companions remain committed to staying inside and arguing about what words to use to describe a reality they haven't gone out to experience for themselves.

I wonder if, at some level, the church sometimes looks to the world like children who have stayed inside to argue about whether it's sprinkling or raining, when in fact we're supposed to be giving thanks for everything that sustains life, and lending our energies to helping things grow out there in the world.

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We need to keep asking ourselves to what extent the church looks like this first-century description of the temple.

Remember, just the day prior to this encounter with the religious leaders, Jesus had proclaimed in the temple: "*It is written, my house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of thieves.*" What was supposed to be a place that witnessed to the community's *deep and abiding relationship with God—a relationship of listening and responding—a relationship of prayer* had instead begun to look like a refuge to which religious leaders could retreat in safety after violating God's commands out in the world. [See Tom Long for more of this line of interpretation.]

Ultimately, Jesus says such a structure cannot stand. Just a few chapters later, when Jesus leaves the temple for the last time, he will predict its destruction, proclaiming *“not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”*

If we ever start to think that the survival of what we know in here is more important than spending our lives for God’s sake out there—whenever we give up that prayerful, responsive posture—we need to be reminded from whence our authority comes.

Here’s how one author puts it:

*“When the goal of a church is to get people into church services and then teach them how to invite people to come to church services, so that they in turn will bring others to more church services—that’s attendance at church services.*

*And church is not ultimately about attending large gatherings.*

*Church is people, people who live a certain way in the world.*

*People who have authority in the world, but authority that comes from breaking themselves open and pouring themselves out so that the world will be healed.*

*The authority that the church has in culture does not come from how right, cool, or loud it is, or how convinced it is of its doctrinal superiority.*

*As Paul says, “We don’t fight with those weapons.” A church’s authority comes from somewhere else—it comes from how we’ve been broken open and poured out, not from how well we’ve pursued power and lobbied and organized ourselves to triumph.” [Rob Bell]*

Jesus doesn’t give up on the religious leaders of his day. He doesn’t give up on any of us either. He keep calling us to come closer, to discover a more abundant life.

And it’s a beautiful thing to witness when a community or an individual says yes to that invitation.

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Many of you were here on Friday for Ruby Wheelon’s memorial service.

I only knew Ruby in the final months of her life, but her feisty spirit shone through to the end. I loved her candor, her irrepressible humor, her love of life.

Several times in her last weeks, Ruby said to me: *I thought I’d be afraid , but I’m not.*

I think Ruby's lack of fear was connected to the growth Ruby was experiencing even as she was preparing to die. As death got closer, there was a real sense in which Ruby became more alive. As her breathing became more labored, rather than growing bitter or fearful, she seemed to become more curious, more open to life. Her world, rather than growing smaller, seemed to enlarge. Right to the end she was willing to make room for new relationships: she came to love a new roommate; she welcomed a new pastor; she didn't close down.

Her daughter Susan was with her on the morning that she died. Ruby announced that morning that she would be dying that day, though the hospice workers saw no sign of particular deterioration in her health. Ruby replied that she had been born on the 19th and she would die on the 19th, and she was right.

Her daughter Susan came over when the nurse called, crying, in the wee hours of that morning to share Ruby's prediction, and so Susan got to spend that last morning with her mother. Susan told me she heard her mother express more gratitude that morning than she'd heard from her in her entire lifetime. She thanked each employee of Highland Farms who came by to see her, having heard that Ruby was making her goodbyes. Susan told me that she seemed to bless each one, offering not generic thanks, but particular expressions of gratitude for actual kindnesses they had offered during her stay. Susan said that her mother seemed to say just what each person needed to hear. It was like she was blessing each one.

What a sure sign that we are in right relationship with the world around us when what we feel is gratitude—what a sure sign that we are at work in the vineyard when blessing is what flows through us.

Then when evidence of a seizure began to show itself in Ruby's feet, Susan gathered her mother into her arms and returned the blessing, giving thanks for Ruby's life and reminding her of all the loved ones who waited for her on the other side of the threshold she was now crossing. When Susan got to the point of reminding Ruby of her own mother's love, Ruby died. She went home, maybe from one set of arms to another.

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Friends, we know that we are *real*, we sense the authority that sustains us, not when we have the best arguments, or the most impressive buildings, but when we feel the love of God flow through us as we are at work in the world. And it is never too late to know that joy.