

17th Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

When Jesus talks to the chief priests and the elders about authority, he reminds us that those with power often get trapped trying to keep it.

Text

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.

"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."

Comment

The chief priests and elders – that is, people with authority – are very interested in the authority Jesus has and how the heck he came to get it. 'By what authority are you doing these things,' they ask, 'and who gave you this authority?' What these things are, and whether or not they benefit the people Jesus is teaching is of no concern. What matters is who has the power to do such things.

It's so often the case with those of us in the middle of a hierarchy. The world we see has a particular order, a set structure, spoken and unspoken rules, and a place of relative privilege for folks like us. Such a construct gives us access to power and a recognisable status, but it can also trap our thinking. Notice how flummoxed those with authority are by Jesus' question, and how much of their own fear they reveal in not answering.

Living inside a system, we may not be consciously aware of the games we play. Yet we instinctively calculate the algorithms. The priests and elders don't reflect honestly on the question Jesus asks; they focus on what the result will mean for them: 'if we say *x*, then this will happen; if we say *y*, then this will happen.' Afraid of how their response will affect their status and their own authority, they attempt a non-answer. They freeze, trapped within their own constructs.

Jesus then gives them the example of two sons. When asked by their father to do some work, the first boy gives an honest, if disappointing response – but then demonstrates the freedom to change his mind. The second son, responding with a dutiful 'yes, sir' ends up doing nothing. He said what his father wanted to hear. Within the context of the larger story Matthew tells, the chief priests and elders are more like the second son. Trapped by conventions, they get caught up with *saying* the right thing without demonstrating the freedom to *do* the right thing.

The chief priests and elders know which son 'did the will of his father,' but they still need Jesus to point out that those without the pretence of moral or social authority (tax collectors and prostitutes, in this case) may hold a certain advantage. Afraid of losing power and privilege, those in authority will often freeze and do what is safe, what will maintain the status quo. The tax collectors and prostitutes, on the other hand, are able to judge John the Baptist on his words and his witness, not on what their belief about him might do for their status.

Those of us in authority are instinctively protective of the structures that provide us privilege. We are therefore often unaware of how difficult it is to have our minds open to change. Higher up on the social ladder, we may be further away from the kingdom of God.

Response

Conflicts that pose a threat will draw out our fight/flight/freeze instincts, and losing social status is a real fear for many of us. Naming that may help explain why we respond as we do in certain situations.

Ask yourself what instinct you are feeling when confronted with a particular issue.

Name the fears that may be motivating that reaction.

Do you want to fight for a cause because you fear that loved ones will be harmed if you don't?

Do you want to run away from an issue because you worry your own reputation may be at risk by getting involved?

Do you freeze because you do not want to do anything that might threaten your relatively safe position?

It may also be helpful to pay attention to how we frame our social activism in terms of ‘what would a good person do?’ or ‘what is the Christian response to this?’ Often the acceptable response is the one that maintains the status quo for those privileged enough to ask such questions at a safe distance.

A radical response will not necessarily be on one side of an issue or another – but it will demonstrate a freedom that allows us to respond based on others’ needs, not our own fears.

Prayer

God who knows our fears,
God who knows our hearts:
we’ve taken your world
and created an endless game
of winners and losers.
We’ve set up a ladder
that gets us nowhere
but up and down.
Bring us down to earth.
Free us
from this hierarchical nonsense,
so we can see each other
face to face
and respond to real needs
without the fear of falling.

Amen.