

QUESTIONS OF AUTHORITY – THE CALL TO OBEDIENCE

Matthew 21:23-32

Pastor Dianne Tobey Covault, Associate Pastor

God of love, God of light, God the three in one, in this time, in this space, may your word only be spoken, and may your word only be heard. Amen.

The vineyard owner asked his two sons to work in the vineyard. Their father comes and gives them an order – “Go and work in the vineyard today.” It doesn’t seem to be a request, or an idea to be considered. It is an order, from an elder to a younger, from a parent to a child. And the first son says simply “I will not.” “Nope, not going to do it, Dad. Too much else going on today.” But then, after the father leaves, this first son changes his mind. “Wait, I guess I really should go and do that. Dad has been pretty nice to me lately. I guess I owe him one.” And he goes.

The child is doing what the father doesn’t expect. Because he didn’t expect the son to go, he has worked to find someone else. Because he didn’t expect the son to go, he hasn’t prepared the barrels or hired the workers to do the next step.

“Yes, I will go” the second son says, but then he doesn’t. What happened then? The father had proceeded with his day assuming the work would be done. He may have had other tasks that depended on the son’s work – preparing the barrels for the wine, readying the workers for the task of culling the grapes. He goes about his business, assuming his son is doing his job. At the end of the day, his son is still sitting in the same spot. No work has been done. The work the father has done has now been negated. Everything has to start over.

Neither of the sons did the right thing right away. Both of them messed up. But in the end, the one who is going to get rewarded is the one who got the job done.

Jesus didn’t say that the tax collectors and the prostitutes were doing right by their sinning or collecting exorbitant taxes from their neighbors. He doesn’t excuse their current behavior. But he does say that they will go to heaven. He also doesn’t say that the chief priests and elders will not go to heaven at all – just that the tax collectors and the prostitutes will go first. The ones who believed, the ones who followed Jesus and repented of their sins, the ones whose actions came to speak over their words, these ones would be with Jesus before those whose words belied their actions.

What does this parable have to do with the question the temple leaders asked Jesus? What does the action of the sons have to do with authority?

I don’t think that is an easy question to answer, or one with only one answer. But I think the story that Jesus tells about the sons and their work gives us some ideas about how we accept authority, and what it means to give Jesus authority over our lives.

As a culture, I think I can make the generalization that we don't really like this idea of authority or of others having authority over us. I know I don't. It seems to be especially true here in the Heights – a place where many of us have a significant amount of higher education and where many of us hold positions of authority over others – either as teachers or professors, or managers, or supervisors, or section heads or even CEOs. I just got my copy of Technology Review the other day – the alumni magazine for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the lead article was about a leading physics professor who had spent his career at the Institute. The main portrait photo in the article pictured him wearing a shirt with the slogan “Question Authority.” I'm sure you've seen that slogan on bumper stickers and t shirts around town.

And we do question authority, don't we? And not without good reason. I was barely cognizant of world news - just beginning to be aware of who our president was - when the Watergate crisis hit our government, in which President Nixon was forced to resign. We watched another president get impeached. Presidential candidates, it seems, are routinely caught in lies. And even here in Cleveland, we have seen our county government leaders caught in webs of corruption and scandal. It seems as though we question authority with good reason.

It wasn't always this way, though, was it? My parents were taught that authority was meant to be obeyed. If you were a child, you were to follow the directions of your parents, your teachers, and pretty much any adult who told you what to do. Questions were not tolerated. Following orders and directions was important. It could even mean life or death. Christine Elliot reminded me of the books and television show Little House on the Prairie, in which little Laura and her sisters were often in precarious and dangerous situations where doing what they were told was not an option or something to be questioned. A simple “yes sir” or “yes ma'am” was the only acceptable answer.

Should we question authority? Sometimes I do think questioning authority is the right thing to do. When we have learned we can't trust those in control, when the power structures we have put in place are clearly created by us without working checks and balances, authority is meant to be questioned. There is nothing wrong with creating a balance of power, with limiting absolute power so that it does not corrupt absolutely.

But at some point, we have to decide who will have ultimate authority in our lives. Will it be a leader or someone we admire? Will it be a spouse or a parent? Will it be a prophet or someone who has written a book that has resonated with us? Will it be God as revealed in Jesus Christ? It's a decision each of us has to make for ourselves. If we don't make it actively, we do make it passively – whose advice do we follow? How do we decide how we spend our time?

Or maybe, which brother are we?

Are you the brother who says they are a follower of Christ, that God has ultimate claim on your life, but isn't really living your life that way? Or are you the brother who knows you keep on falling but keep trying to get up anyway, who goes out to the field even if you aren't sure you can do the work the father needs you to do?

This past weekend I attended the retreat for the Stephen's Ministry group at Church of the Saviour. Stephen's Ministry is a nationally known system for training and equipping laypeople to provide care for members of congregations. Here at Church of the Saviour we are blessed to have 20 trained Stephen Ministers in our congregation. The retreat, led by one of our trained lay speakers, Eric Lewis, focused on Care for the Caregiver. Eric said many things that resonated with me, but one stood out more than all the rest. If we are to be followers of Christ, we must spend time each day alone with God. If we are to be followers of Christ, we must take the time to listen to what God is saying to us in a daily time of devotion and prayer.

If Jesus is your ultimate authority, would anyone who knows you recognize that? Whoever has authority over your life is the one who commands most of your time and attention. Whoever has authority over your life is the one who you trust as you discern how you spend your time and your money, how you raise your children, even the words you speak and those you surround yourself with.

Jesus doesn't demand that you do as he asks. Like the father in the story, he just comes to us and says "I have work that needs to be done." We can choose to do his work, or we can choose not to do it. The choice is ours.

Which brother did the right thing? We know the answer. Which brother will we be? Can we be counted on to follow through, to allow our actions to show that we are Christians, to answer God's call to discipleship and mission? Or will we be the ones who say we will do something, but then just throw up our hands and walk away?

The work we've been asked to do isn't always easy, and it isn't always something that is in our comfort zone.

For the past month or so, the nominating committee of our church has been meeting. The task of the committee, according to our Book of Discipline, is to "identify, develop, deploy, evaluate, and monitor Christian spiritual leadership for the local congregation." You may have gotten a call from a member of the committee asking you if you will serve in a ministry area of our church. Or maybe you have gotten a call before.

Today's gospel lesson might make you think before you answer "yes" to that call.

A couple of years ago, I was asked to run the Scholastic Book Fair at my daughter's school. I was asked in September, and the fair wasn't until March, and I said yes. As the date got closer, I realized I really didn't have time to run the book fair. Some responsibilities I had thought would be completed by February were not done. My work tasks were piling up and of course my family needed me too. I ended up doing the bare minimum of what I needed to do, while the other leader took over the majority of the tasks.

I was the second son.

You've probably had times like this too, when you have agreed to do something but find that your schedule is too full, or the time just isn't right, or it is just not something you can make yourself do.

In a church like this, with so many activities and so much going on, we need to be able to count on one another. Our volunteer coordinator, Bobbie Buchs, knows that. As many of you know, once a month in the sanctuary on a Tuesday night, we have a Taizé worship service. If you haven't been yet, I encourage you to attend. Part of what makes the service special is the candles on the altar. Between pillar candles and hurricane lamps and votives, there are over 30 candles that light up our worship space.

The first month I was here, I set up those candles on Tuesday morning with the help of Marilyn Meadows. Marilyn had been doing this task herself for a long time, and was ready to pass it on. It took a while for her to explain to me where everything went and how to make the altar look as beautiful as it looks in the photo we use to advertise the service. I knew it would be difficult for me to continue doing this task every month. But then Bobbie stepped in. First, she spoke with the men's Fourth Day Emmaus group that meets at the church on Monday nights. They agreed to set up the altar each month. And then, Bobbie found two more volunteers – Ben and Erin Reidhead, who agreed to take everything down and put it away.

On the second Tuesday this month, about three hours before the service was to begin, I stopped by the sanctuary on my way out to pick up my girls from school. As usual I was running

late, and I had forgotten to check to see if things had been set up. I walked in and turned on the lights to see – the altar fully decorated, all the candles laid out, the cloth in place. I breathed a huge sigh of relief as I was able to go home and have dinner with my family before I came back for worship. And the same thing happened later in the week when I realized I hadn't checked to be sure things had been taken down. I didn't have to remind anyone. They had done their tasks, just as they had been asked, so I could do my tasks too.

Following Jesus, giving Jesus supreme authority, isn't just about the big decisions we make, like whether or not we will join a church or how we will raise our children. It's about all of the little decisions, about supporting other people's ministries, about doing our own ministry. It's about saying "yes" and following through.

The text message from God this week might look like this "Did you follow through? Did you do more than just pick up the phone?" With God's help, we can answer that question with a resounding "Yes". Yes, I didn't just say I would do it. I did it, and I am ready to do more, whatever God is calling me to do. Thanks be to God, we have a community who will help us as we answer God's call. Thanks be to God, we have Jesus who will be our authority in the big and the small decisions of our lives.

Will you be in prayer with me?

God who calls, we admit that we sometimes don't bother to pick up the phone. But worse, God, we admit that sometimes we say "yes" when we know we mean "no" Help us to organize our lives to show the world that you are our authority. Help us to follow through in our actions and everywhere in our lives to show the world that you are our authority. Thanks be to God for being a God we can count on, as one with authority. Amen.