

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia
Preparing for Sunday, October 1, 2017 // Proper 21, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus 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."

Background and general observations

Although early church tradition has it that the author of this Gospel was Matthew, the tax collector, who was a disciple of Jesus, most scholars today believe that this Gospel was written between 80 and 90 AD by an Israelite man. The Gospel According to Matthew seems to have been written for a Jewish audience. Jesus is the authoritative interpreter of Moses and the promised messianic king of Israel.

In this passage, Jesus has already entered Jerusalem in triumph, with a very large crowd spreading cloaks and branches on the road as they shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David..." (21:1-11) Then, in verses 12-17, Jesus cleanses the temple and then cures the blind and the lame who were brought to him. After a brief confrontation with authorities, Jesus spends the night outside the city. The next morning (verses 18-22), Jesus was hungry and approached a fig tree that turned out to be barren of fruit. Jesus cursed the tree, and it withered. The disciples are amazed, and Jesus takes the opportunity to teach them about the power of prayerful faith. Our lesson follows that episode and raises questions about ways in which Jesus' ministry of transformation and reclamation might disturb—if not offend—those with a vested interest in maintaining power, or those who find relinquishing control to be difficult. The parable of the two sons is one that illuminates the struggle to manage human authority with divine authority. Jesus rebukes those who claim to be virtuous and defends those that others considered to be unrighteous—the tax collectors and the prostitutes; it is the believers who are given entry to the kingdom of heaven.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. One theme throughout Matthew's narrative concerns the tension between traditional leadership and divine leadership. It is possible that the Jerusalem leaders question Jesus' authority because they are simply struggling to understand Jesus' actions. Perhaps when they ask Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" they

are expecting him to name a teacher, or to offer some human association that will help them understand Jesus's demonstrations—his curing of the sick, his cursing of the fig tree. They seem to be prepared to counter, refute, or dismiss all claims to human authority with their *own* authority since they, after all, are the leaders. One response they might be less prepared to entertain is the possibility that Jesus wields authority from God.

What is it about divine authority that threatens human authority? Why might we be more willing to rebel against a human leader than a divine leader? What about our essential human character is being tested?

2. All kinds of questions are asked of Jesus: about his identity, about signs and proof, about divorce, the commandments, the resurrection, eternal life, etc. But here it's as if religious officials seek to entrap Jesus. Rather than answering their question, Jesus responds with a question of his own in the form of a parable. Whether he is being indirect or downright evasive, Jesus offers this parable as a counter-question that serves as yet another way of confronting the conflict between divine authority and our own sense of power and control. The essential tension: how do we reconcile human power with the power of God? What possible answers could Jesus have given, and how would those have entrapped him?

Rather than pointing fingers at these officials, how does it feel to place yourself in the shoes of Jesus' opponents? Perhaps it is wise to realize that even the most spiritual among us are prone to reducing divine authority to human terms and reinforcing the kind of power structure Jesus seeks to transform.

3. The parable Jesus tells compares two sons: one who says he will not do what is asked of him but then changes his mind, and another who says he will indeed do what is asked, but doesn't. As with the other parables, we are led to reflection, some bewilderment, and in this case particularly, self-reflection: *which am I?* Some might sense an accusation in the parable—after all, many who claim to be virtuous or who appear to obey God and observe God's law fail to do so and we all know that we have a human tendency to be hypocritical, to judge, to criticize, to project onto others what we despise in ourselves.

It seems we are being asked to ponder what it means to reconsider and what's at stake when we change our mind. What links the parable of the two sons to Jesus' encounter with the religious officials? With which son do you most closely identify?

The parable concludes with might be seen as a reversal of expectations; Jesus tells us that "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." In other words, those who are seen as less than righteous but who believe in God's will and authority will not only be given entry into heaven, but will be given entry *first*. How do you respond to this reversal?

4. Later on in Matthew's gospel we read the Great Commission, which includes yet another mention of authority. Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Where does your authority come from? Who or what has given it to you? What has given you a sense of power and control? Your education? Wealth? Leadership position? Perhaps your sense of authority comes from your faithfulness, your gentleness, your kindness, your service to community.

What sort of authority is valued most in the world today? What sort of authority is it most important for you to have? What power might need relinquishing? What role and responsibility do you think the Church has in reconciling human authority and divine authority?