

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.

For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God within us, for
the word of God among us,
Thanks be to God.

September 18th marked the 10th anniversary of me speaking
behind this beautiful, old wooden box for the first time, which was also
my first sermon ever. A few months before that, I had started
participating in a weekly Bible study with a fair number of Marshfield's
worship leaders. A few weeks before that first sermon, I was walking
by Pastor Kevin Buchanan and Pastor Janet Wolfe who were standing
together, just outside the church office. They were struggling with an

important question: who would cover the first Sunday after Pastor Kevin's last Sunday as FPC's pastor? I learned this part of the story after the fact. All I heard at the time, and I can still hear it clear as a bell, was Pastor Janet's voice saying, "How 'bout this guy?" I cherish these four words, and the person who said them. I take them as my calling, perhaps mostly because they end with a question mark.

Today's question is "By what authority?" The chief priests and elders challenging Jesus break the question into two, "by what authority are you doing these things," and "who gave that authority to you." Jesus rebuffs their challenge by merging their two questions into one, "What is the source of John's baptism?," or more to the point, "Where does authority come from?" Reading this morning's text in this time and place, with a national leader claiming all authority (dare I say, to mixed reviews?) and a church functioning without a leader for going on two years (dare I say, fairly well?), we might take the opportunity to deeply consider this question.

We often think of authority as power, and it is, but it is a bit more complicated than that. It actually divides power into two distinct parts: the capacity or ability to act, and the permission to act. The capacity to act comes with having a living body. The ability to act comes from training and practice. But where does the permission to act come from? And where does the need for that permission come from? If we have the capacity to act, why isn't that enough? And thinking back a few weeks to Peter's failed attempt to walk on water, Peter asked for and received Jesus' permission to "Come", but he still sank, like the rock

Jesus named him for. Why wasn't Jesus' permission enough? What is authority good for?

The word in the original Greek translated as authority might help us here. *Ex-ou-see'-a*. Ex-ousia. We all know the prefix, "ex," as in exit. It means "out," or outside of, or not, the negation of something. Ousia is not so simple. It is a foundational word for both philosophy and theology. It is often translated essence, or being, or substance. It is formed from another Greek word, spelled "e-i-m-i," which means what it sounds like when you say it, "I, me." It is what is mine that makes me, me. Given a little wiggle room, it might come close to the notion of a true self. One could think of ousia as "self" and exousia as not that, or simply, "other."

The word, exousia, undergoes a radical shift in meaning from the time of Plato, around 400 BCE, to the time Jesus. It begins as a very negative term. Ousia was seen as the governed and governable rational self. Outside of that, exousia, was the realm of the libertine, the hedonist, the one who is only governed by passions, appetites, and desires. By Jesus' time, exousia comes to represent the exact opposite, the external authority that governs the ungovernable self. My ears always perk up when I find a word that has literally reversed meaning. It means we are talking about two sides of one coin. The coin has just flipped. Ousia/exousia, master/slave, self/other. One cannot exist without the other. It remains two sides of one thing.

Plato, in his writings, spoke far more often of ousia than of his problem child, exousia. In the New Testament, . . . ousia appears

exactly two times. It is in Luke's gospel, once when the Prodigal son asks of his father, "Give me what is mine," and once when he gets it. Exousia, on the other hand, appears in the New Testament over 100 times to describe a vertical relationship by which legitimate permission to act is established at the top with the singularity of God, and is passed down through many levels and to many persons. It is what we would call authority, but the single word, authority, masks the fact that its meaning is dependent upon two, ousia and exousia, the one who governs, and the one who submits to that governing.

The priests and elders are still fuming about Jesus bringing traffic to a standstill with his Easter parade, and bringing the economy of the temple to a halt by over-turning the tables. But they don't ask why he did this. They ask by what or by which of many authorities he does what he does. When it comes to a contest between multiple authorities, they can only see Jesus as their enemy, and they need to know if they are just fighting this dusty, itinerate preacher, or something else much bigger. Reminds me of a story my friend, Del Taylor, used to tell. Back in the day, he was a big city cop. Sometimes the punks he had to deal with would say, "You think you are a big man because of that gun on your hip." "Nope," he'd answer, as the handcuffs clicked shut, "It's the radio. There's a whole army in here."

Unlike Del, Jesus does not provide the priests with the certainty of an answer. He doesn't justify either their planned violence against him, or their giving in and joining the Hey-sanna-Ho-sanna crowd. Instead, he shows them exactly where they are stuck, between

conflicting authorities. They don't even seem to recognize that Jesus' one question has silenced their two questions.

I am very close to taking the space created by this unanswered question "by what authority?" as the very ground in which the seed of Christian faith was planted, but it is as if another seed took root in its place. Virtually all the horrors of human history - the wars, inquisitions, and jihads, the plunderings, the enslavements, the genocides - are the fruit of an invasive species, this question answered with, "Gott mit uns," God is with us. It has me questioning whether virtually all our creeds and confessions aren't effectively Authority (with a capital A) seized and weaponized to vanquish anyone who we perceive challenges it. It makes me wish the question Jesus refuses to answer, "By what authority?," in all its hesitancy and indeterminance, was enshrined in our Book of Confessions. It would sure make a quicker read!

The gospel we call Matthew is essentially bookended by this question. Recall that, at the beginning, Jesus is tempted by Satan's offer of authority over all the authorities of earth, the perennial promise of one authority to rule them all. All he has to do is acknowledge that that authority was a product of his surrender to Satan, which ultimately means that the authority he is offered is not and never can be his, it is Satan's authority over him created in the moment that he would surrender his own. It is a paradoxical surrender of authority to get authority. Jesus says, "no," perhaps the most authoritative word there is.

It is not until one of the last verses of the last chapter of Matthew, that Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," but this happens at the end of the story. As Paul writes in our first scripture, it is only after giving up his equality with God, emptying himself of all authority, and becoming obedient to the point of death that God exalts his name above every other, and he is given all authority.

As one who persecuted and prosecuted the early church, the apostle Paul must have had a pretty clear experience of the limits of authority. Read that conversion story in Acts 9 again. He is not knocked off a horse. There is no horse. He is not even knocked down. It says, "He fell to the ground." When the voice speaks, he asks, "Who are you, Lord?" Ah, another question mark! Paul reveals two insights in this short question.

First, he knows he is addressing the Lord, the Greek word is kurios. We moderns tend to use this word, Lord, pretty lightly, but in Paul's time, saying kurios was the equivalent of a slave in the Antebellum South saying, "Master." It refers to the one to whom something belongs, the one who decides if the thing is kept or destroyed, the one who doesn't just own the thing but owns the use of the thing and anything that use produces. It is not by accident that Paul calls himself a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ. Some translations soften it to "servant," but there is no softening the Greek word Paul uses, "doulos," literally, property with no personal rights or freedom, at all.

The second insight, and just as important: he has to ask, "Who are you?" The overwhelming power of the moment that takes Paul to the ground is that Authority itself is speaking directly to him and, beyond that, he cannot answer the question of who or what it is. Paul would live the rest of his life as a slave to a Master crucified by human authorities, but resurrected and exalted by the one Authority that incorporates ultimate mastery and ultimate submission. He would write in Romans 10, "If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Not saved from an angry god, or a fiery afterlife. Paul never mentions those things. But saved from slavery to the never-ending contest of who is slave and who is master. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," says Paul, the mind of the one who is in the form of God and the mind that takes the form of a slave. The one who governs and the one who needs governing. The one who saves and the one who needs saving. The one who loves and the one who is loved.

But how? I hear you suggesting, "Dan, why not try one of those Zen koans?" Good idea. Master Mumon's case number 12 titled, "Zuigan Calls Master." It goes like this,

"Every day Master Zuigan Shigen used to call out to himself, "Oh, Master!" and would answer himself, "Yes?"

"Are you awake?" he would ask,
and would answer, "Yes, I am."

"Don't be deceived by others, any day, any time."

"No, I will not."

It is a practice of identifying the one who calls and the one who responds, the one who asks, "By what authority," and the one who knows the answer. The master and not the master, the one who can be deceived and the one who cannot, they cannot be the same, and yet they cannot be separated. Let the same mind be in us. Amen.