

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in our Gospel lesson we find Jesus in a temple in Jerusalem. He has just entered the city riding on a donkey and the people were spreading their cloaks and other cut branches from the trees on the road ahead of him and the people were all abuzz and shouting:

‘Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’

¹¹ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

(Matthew 21:9b-11)

Of course, the religious authority, the chief priests, the Elders, and the Pharisees are all just a bit angered by this Jesus character, just who does he think he is and by what authority is he doing these things. Despite how the people are treating Jesus, the *religious authority* don’t know Jesus, and they certainly do not approve of him...by what authority is he doing all these things, and who gave him all of this “so-called” authority that he thinks he has? It certainly didn’t come from any of us.

I think I can say with some certainty that I believe deep down that there is not an ordained pastor alive that has not looked at a tele-evangelist at one time or another, that has not thought the same thoughts as these chief priests and elders that are before us today in our Gospel lesson...by what authority are these TV preachers doing what they are doing...they are so corrupt and ought to be selling shoes instead of religion. Moreover, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we all have had these thoughts at one time or another about the faith of others and what their faith ought to look like when compared to mine. We have all judged others in order to feel more confident in our own faith. With this in mind, I think if I were to title this sermon today it would be titled, “And you call yourself a Good Christian!”

Whether we like it or not, Jesus calls us all out today in our self-righteousness with one simple question: “What do you think?” And of course, we answer...and by doing so we show our assumed authority, which seems to be the center of our Gospel lesson today.

Authority by definition is the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience. We appoint authority and we accept the power of authority and while it is not so obvious today in our culture, for the most part, people agree to follow an authority figure. We listen to authority figures because we feel that these individuals are worthy of respect. Generally speaking, people perceive the objectives and demands of an authority figure as reasonable and beneficial, or true...that is, until we can subvert their authority by pointing out the fault of that authority so we ourselves can assume more authority in our arrogance and self-righteousness.

Case in point...each week we gather in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and we confess a faith...a belief in this Triune God, starting with these very words:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

In our understanding of authority, we would say that God, being the creator of heaven and earth would be an authority figure worthy of our respect, would we not? But in the beginning and to this day we do not.

From the opening of Holy Scripture we hear:

^{2:15} The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.
¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (Genesis 2:15-17)

The story continues:

^{3:4} But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."
⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3:4-6)

The creation story from Genesis along with this parable before us today shows us that authority can easily be subverted by our false sense of authority that is assumed in ourselves. And today in this parable, Jesus teaches us that we quickly subvert God's authority with our personal sense of faith and morality or even our opinion of what we think God would find favor in...which of course is usually the very same thing we happen to find favor in.

Jesus very cleverly shows us this by simply asking the chief priests, the elders, and us...“What do you think?” And by doing so, we reason and we may even go back and forth in a discussion, and then assume to know which of the sons did the correct thing.

So, what do you think:

A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹ He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" (Matt 21:28-31)

We assume our authority when asked...what do you think, and we then begin to parse out the situation presented to us in our minds...we figure the first son had a change of heart and eventually went to work in the vineyard, but the second son flat out lied, so based on *our* moral judgment and *our* understanding and sensitivities, we assume the first one was the good son the one who did what the father asked. I know there will be someone who will see it differently and make their authoritative point. Nonetheless, we tend to see this parable as a test...and as we attempt to answer the question properly and correctly...we do so because we think our answer to the question posed to us in this parable will show my faith and my understanding of scripture...as “correct” or rather...“authoritative.” But the parable is not a question of who is right or wrong, who is morally upright, or who can figure it all out. The parable places before us the will of the Father. What do you think...who did the will of the Father? The bigger question within this parable is NOT for us to decide which son is the good son, rather the parable is directing us to the will of the Father...do we even consider the will of the Father as we attempt to establish our authority by explaining who we think the good son is?

As Baptized Christians the parable calls us to ask, when we are asked, what do you think...who did the will of the Father our response ought to be what is the will of the Father and to know that will. St. John would tell us this when asked who did the will of the Father:

This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." (John 6:40)

What do you think...who did the will of the Father? There is only one Son who did the will of the Father and it is not either of these knuckleheads in this parable that did so, it was Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ who did, who does, and who will do the will of the Father. We think pointing out another's shortcomings, their missteps, or their lack of faith from our authoritative point of view reveals our strong and powerful faith...within a correct answer...however, answering correctly is not the will of the Father...the will of the Father is Jesus Christ.

The will of the Father is not to condemn the sons within the parable; it is to recognize the grace given freely to us all through the One Son who does the will of the Father. At the right time, Christ died for the ungodly...that includes either son in the parable as well as you and I who attempt to assert our authority by establishing who the better son is. Do we really need to be asked, as Christians to do the will of the Father...to believe in Him...if so, then are we able to even call ourselves Christian? Do we really need to be asked to see that through our faith, given to us, in Jesus Christ we have eternal life and that we are raised up on the last day with Christ?

This parable shows us that the will of God is not always evident to those who presume to know and to have authority about God because our self-appointed authority always gets in the way and ends up subverting God's grace, God's love made known in Jesus Christ, and last but certainly not least, God's authority.

Today in this parable, Jesus is once again subverting what we assume to know about God and the authority we assume to have in that. The Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth said that we are all "amateurs" when it comes to our faith in Christ. This question that Christ puts before us today implies an easy answer, or so we think. But our answers show us what Karl Barth claims, that we are but mere amateurs with our faith. With this question it shows that our faith is undergirded by the convictions we draw upon in our amateur and egocentric paradigms. In simple terms we base our faith and our authority of that faith in ourselves and by what makes us comfortable...one son had a change in heart and one son lied...we see a very simple moral question that we can answer very easily when asked...what do you think?

Given that authority we assume from the question, we say what we think and by doing so we show that we step in front of our faith every time with our opinion, with our personal feelings, and with our judgment. Our faith does not enable us to answer the question, who did the will of the Father because this parable truly shows us what Isaiah proclaims:

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way...
(Isa 53:6)

Whatever authority we assume from our strategic debate about this parable, may we turn our vision and understanding from ourselves or the 2 sons – and continue to point to the Son who did the will of the Father for us all. May we be of the same heart and mind that St. Paul is reminding the church at Philippi today:

¹ If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...(Philippians 2:1-5).

From the beginning of time, we have sought God's authority for ourselves and we have subverted that authority in our own self-absorbed and egocentric sense of faith. Nonetheless, That faith is, and remains a faith that knows the will of God as revealed to us in God's precious Word. And in that faith, no matter how big or small, we have the promise of eternal life; and the promise that Jesus Christ will raise us up on the last day, may we then, not only, understand this as the will of God but as Martin Luther wrote concerning the value of God's Word:

“This is the principal item, and the holiest of holy possessions, by reason of which the Christian people are called holy; for God's Word is holy and sanctifies everything it touches; it is indeed the very holiness of God.”¹

The Holy Word of God is Jesus Christ, the only Son who does the will of the Father, and the will of the Father is not death, but that we may turn to him and live! Now as we turn to him in this Holy Meal, placed into our hands...is the holiest of holy possessions, His precious body and blood. *THIS* (Holy Eucharist) is the Son who does the will of the Father given for each us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Edited by Timothy F. Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 1989. Part V The Reform of the Church, chapter 25, On the Councils of the Church – Part III (1539) page 546.