

Text: Matthew 21: 23-32  
Title: By what Authority?  
Date: 09.27.20  
Roger Allen Nelson

I went to a wedding.

There was a bride in white and a minister in black.

There were bridesmaids and flowers.

There was a groom and groomsmen decked out in tuxedos with gangster fedoras and spats – a look they may regret later.

The wedding was in a gazebo at a golf course. The vows were spoken, the rings exchanged, and then the minister said, “By the power vested in me by the World Wide Web I now pronounce you....”

It caught me completely by surprise; I hope no one else heard my gag reflex. It turns out that the minister was a friend from the bar who got ordained through the internet.

Now, I know it is all rage to have a friend or a sibling officiate your wedding. You can get ordained on-line by the Universal Life Church for 40 bucks; and according to their website they’ve ordained over 20 million people. And, I get asked regularly, “Hey, my buddy asked me to do his wedding. What should I do?” My stock answer is, “Go to seminary?”

And, all of this is just humorous introduction (hopefully), but bubbling underneath is the question of authority.

By what authority do we marry?

What authority do we trust?

To what authority do we defer?

What’s the nature of authority?

The question seems timely. We live in what has been described as a “crisis of authority.” When priests are pedophiles, pastors philander, and politicians lie authority in the institutions they serve erodes. When the instructions of epidemiologists, who have worked a lifetime in their field, are discarded for what the guy who sat behind you in high school physics posts on Facebook, authority is in question. The authority of the Supreme Court hinges on processes and decisions that are free of political influence. The authority of the police is questioned when law enforcement is perceived as neither equitable nor even handed. When news is filtered through such partisan lens that a shared understanding of factual reality is elusive, authority is in crisis. And as Barton Gellman puts it:

*If we are lucky, this fraught and dysfunctional election cycle will reach a conventional stopping point in time to meet crucial deadlines in December and January. And, the contest will be decided with sufficient authority that the losing candidate will be forced to yield. Collectively then we will have made our choice—a messy one, no doubt, but clear enough to arm the president-elect with (the authority) a mandate to govern.*

You get the point. Authority is elusive and complicated and in crisis. Which is why the chief priests and elders of the people approached Jesus and asked,

*By what authority are you doing these things? And, who gave you this authority?*

Let's set the stage...

Jesus entered Jerusalem to the cheers of the poor and the pushed down. He made his way to the temple court, created a ruckus, cleared out the sellers and money changers and then, while occupying the temple, he's approached by the authorities.

It should be noted that the political legitimacy of the priests and elders was itself a matter of dispute. They were wealthy landholders who were in cahoots with Rome. The system worked for them. They had power, wealth, and political/religious capital. Think of them as the "One Percenters."

So, when they ask about the authority of Jesus they have a vested interest. They probably hoped Jesus would offer the name of a teacher or an alliance that would help them better understand his actions. (If he says he's an Obama Democrat or a Regan Republican then they can better grasp what he's up to....)

More to the point, if he was part of a particular school or a tradition they would be prepared to counter any and all claims to authority. Because, at least as far as the status quo was concerned, there were no claims to authority that they couldn't trump. They were the power structure. The apparatus was rigged in their favor.

Voltaire quipped that we ought to judge a person by his questions rather than his answers. And Jesus answers the questions of the priests and elders with a question. It wasn't politically evasive double speak, but he sidesteps a direct answer and asks about the authority of John the Baptist.

And that's a particularly thorny question.

Because, to accept the authority of John was to accept John's witness to Jesus and therefore to accept the authority of Jesus. But, to deny the authority of John would put the priests and elders in a precarious position with the people. And they needed the system to continue working. They needed everyone in their rightful place; the current social order needed to remain intact. The question Jesus asks jams them up. And...

They're knocked off kilter.

They're a little lost.

They're left speechless.

But, back to the question of authority.

Daytime television gadfly Dr. Phil, was asked, "If you could interview anyone in the world, past or present, who would it be?" Without hesitation Dr. Phil replied, "Jesus Christ. I would really like to interview Jesus Christ. I would like to have a conversation with him about the meaning of life."

And, sure, I guess you could have an informal conversation with Jesus and banter back and forth about walking on water and “Did you really mean it when you said...” I guess you could ask why he did this and didn’t do that. I guess you could inquire about what he thinks and feels and wants us to know about life.

But, eventually a conversation with Jesus is going to take a hard turn. Eventually you’re going to have to deal with the question of authority.

*By what authority are you doing these things? And, who gave you this authority?*

And, quite frankly, that question encapsulates the Christian gospel as a whole. As Ira Brent Driggers puts it:

*...then and now, everything depends upon the source of Jesus’ authority. If it is ultimately “from humans,” then Jesus is really no different than the next charismatic leader (except for maybe his more pathetic death), and the church will be forced to define itself only as a human institution among other human institutions. In other words, the church will be forced, like Jesus’ opponents, to compete against perceived rivals, reducing its mission to the quest for power, even if it purports to use that power for doing “good” in the world.*

*If, however, Jesus’ authority is “from heaven,” then his messianic claim is valid, and the church must stake claim to a unique mission, a mission that relinquishes power in bringing Christ to the world, just as Christ relinquished power in bringing himself to the world.*

Dear friends, that is to say that as the authority of Jesus is God-given, and different or above any other claim to authority,  
then our primary allegiance,  
our last answer,  
our bottom dollar resides in the way and will of Jesus.  
His is the last and only authority that matters.

Our current “crisis of authority” may well tear our shared fabric to shreds. We may find ourselves in a political and constitutional crisis unlike any we’ve experienced before. We may hear claims to authority in all manner of forms....

But, for the disciples of Jesus, for those who recognize in Jesus an authority from heaven, there is a deeper and more profound allegiance that supersedes all other claims.

For under that authority, religious lip service and political status don’t amount to squat. That authority is no respecter of persons; tax collectors and prostitutes are welcomed before the priests and elders. All are welcome. All are accepted. All are loved. All are called to repentance and living in pursuit of the kingdom of God.

And therefore, it is surely no coincidence that the next time the word for authority surfaces in Matthew’s gospel it’s in the last words that Jesus speaks to his disciples. His final instructions are,

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, as you are going, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, (even) to the very end of the age.*

Dear friends, may it be so with us.

May we live in keeping with the heaven-given authority of Jesus.

May it be a matter of our heart's allegiance, our mind's seeking, and the manner in which we order our lives and love our neighbors.

Amen.