

“Who’s in Charge?”

Matthew 21:23-32, Philippians 2:1-13

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I’m a Baby Boomer. Probably a lot of us here are. Baby Boomers are that generation of Americans who were born in those post-war years from about 1946-1964. We’re not the “Greatest Generation,” that preceded us, the one that won WWII and took on civil rights, and we’re not Generation X that followed us, who were the first real “latch-key” kids and the MTV generation and now as adults are the entrepreneurial generation. No, we’re the Baby Boomers, which just means that there are a lot of us. But what characterizes us? Most scholars who study these things say that one of the overriding characteristics of Baby Boomers is a rejection of traditional values. Do you remember the bumper sticker, “Question Authority?” We used to see them all the time. In the wake of the Vietnam War and the Watergate mess, our generation saw it as our responsibility to question the traditional authorities that had gotten us into these messes. That slogan was popularized by the psychologist Timothy Leary, who also popularized a lot of drug use during the 60s and 70s, but after Vietnam and Watergate, it became the slogan of the whole Baby Boom generation. *Question Authority*. Question who is in charge here.

Who is in charge? Who has authority? The parable that Jesus tells about the two sons is ultimately one about authority. The chief priests and elders come to Jesus and ask him by what authority does he do these things: performing miracles and teaching the people. Remember that this is during the Passover week, there are a lot of people gathered in Jerusalem, there are tensions with the Romans, and the last thing the leaders of the Temple need is this rabble rouser from Galilee getting the people all fired up.

So they ask him, “Who gave you the authority to do this?” It's a question designed to trap him. If he says, no one, then they can tell the crowds that he is a nobody from nowhere and they should not listen to him. If he says his authority comes from God, then they can accuse him of blasphemy, because as the leaders of the Temple, *they* get to decide who's from God and who is not.

So, that's their question. By what authority?

But instead of falling into their trap and answering their question, Jesus turns the tables and asks his own questions. He asks, “Did John's baptism come from heaven or from human beings?” But they know that this question was designed to trap them as well. If they said “from God,” he would say, “Why then did you not listen to him?” If they said “from human beings,” then the crowd would turn on them because they were convinced that John the Baptist was from God.

So, the Temple leaders say they don't know. But Jesus isn't satisfied with that, and so he tells them a parable. It is the parable of the two sons. One son is asked to go work in the family vineyard and he says he won't go, but later he changes his mind and goes. The second son is also asked to go work in the vineyard and tells his father he will, only doesn't go, maybe he never had any intention of going. In the end, which one only pleases himself and which one seeks to please his father?

So, upon hearing this parable, the question to the religious leaders, the question that they must be asking themselves is “Which one am I?” Am I the one who gives lip service to what God wants, but never really does it? Or am I the one who, though I have my faults and don't always say the right things, in the end does my father's will? Jesus is obviously accusing the religious leaders of his time of being those who pay lip service to God but who never really follow him—they are the

second son. Oh, they say the right things, they go to Temple and make sacrifices at the right times, even making sure others see them in their piety but their hearts never really belong to God, their hearts belong to themselves, their own egos.

By comparison, Jesus gives the examples of the tax collectors and the prostitutes and those who the religious leaders would consider unworthy, those who come from the margins, those who've come late to the faith—like the laborers from last week's parable—but those who come with open hearts, tired of following their egos and ready to follow God, Jesus proclaims them more worthy of heaven than the Temple leaders.

And then, he brings up John the Baptist again: “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” The tax collectors and prostitutes are the ones who repented as John asked them to; they are like the first son. They came to the faith late, but they are eager to know and follow God.

So, the question now, of course, for us, is which son are we? Are we primed to follow our ego or are we ready to follow God? Which son are we? Well, in truth, we are all a little of both. Just your presence here this morning suggests you are like the first son; you are seeking to know God, to learn, to challenge yourself to transcend the desires of your ego and seek connection to God's greater purpose for your life. But just as easily, we can slip back into the more self-centered ways of the second son—I can, you can, we all can—and we are reminded of our frailty, that we're human. Yes, we are flawed but we are also hopeful, seeking-people who, like the tax collector and the prostitute, have faith and a desire to grow in our spiritual maturity.

And what about here, in our church? As a covenant community? Who is in charge here? Well, we have a board of elders who make decisions about a lot of stuff, budget and building use policy, church program, stuff like that, so maybe they are in charge. But we're Presbyterians, which means that we are a "connectional" church—we are connected to other Presbyterian congregations around the state and around the country and the world, and we send them money and they *oversee* some of the things that we do, so maybe *they* are in charge. But actually the Presbytery and the national General Assembly are just elders and ministers that have been elected by members of the *congregation* like you, so maybe *you* are in charge. Or really, there are things that I get to decide all on my own with no input from anyone else if I don't want, like the scriptures to include, what to say in the sermon or the prayers, what hymns to sing on Sunday mornings, so maybe *I* am in charge.

No.

So, *who* is in charge here? By whose authority do we do what we do?

A few years ago, I was asked, "Are we a Bible-based church?" Are we a church that believes in the Bible? Are we a church that takes the Bible as our authority? Great question. Are we? What do you think?

This month we are heading into a celebration around the world of the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, on October 31, 1517, a young priest Martin Luther began publicly questioning the authority of the church leaders of his time. One of his principles was "sola scriptura," which is Latin for "only scripture." He wanted a church that used the Bible as its authority, not the words of a bishop or a cardinal, but the word of God. If he was going to be proved wrong, it had to be from the Bible. So, as Protestants, we are a Bible-based church,

right? Well, yes, but does this mean we read it literally? Some Christians would say *that* is the mark of a Bible-based church.

But maybe you would broaden that definition, argue that part of being Bible-based is considering other things like the historical context so we can better understand what is meant by the scripture. We look at literary context and the placement of scripture in relation to other scripture to get a clearer picture, to see the deeper, more complex meaning of scripture. And we consider our personal context: who God has shown himself to be in our lives, what we know about God simply by being in relationship with him. So, is a literal reading of the bible *our* only authority? No.

So, what is our authority?

Have you ever noticed that when we do a baptism in this church we always start with the same words? They are the words from the very end of Matthew, when the resurrected Jesus gives his final charge to his disciples: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Our real authority, the one we base our faith upon is Jesus Christ. He is the one we follow.

This church is not my church, it’s not your church, it’s not the Presbyterian’s church, it is the church of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we try to make it into “our” church. We do things so that we will look good. We structure our worship so that we will be entertained or so we will be entertaining to others. We make decisions on boards that will make us comfortable and feel good about ourselves. We avoid talking about things that might cause some upset. When our ego becomes the driving

force behind our involvement here, we fail to prayerfully discern the will of God and we become like the second son. We say, “Yes, we go to church, we worship God, we’re good Christians,” but does it make a difference in our lives? Are we serving ourselves and not God?

But this is the church of Jesus Christ. The foundational principles of our church proclaim: Almighty God, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, has given to him all power in heaven and on earth, not only in this age but also in the age to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body. The Church’s life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ’s ongoing life and work.¹

What that means to us is that Christ is Lord not just in our church, in the way we do things here, but we make the decision that Christ is Lord in our hearts. When Jesus points out that the tax collectors and prostitutes are closer to heaven than the religious leaders, he means that in their hearts they are seeking God and God is seeking them. They are the ones who repented as John asked them to. They are the ones who get heaven, because heaven is a gift, not a reward, and what is required is not fulfilling a list of requirements, but hands and hearts that are open to receive it.

In our church, in our homes, in our personal lives, whom do we follow? Do we let our egos take over? Do we have a loyalty beyond our survival as a church, beyond our security as a family, beyond our own comfort as individuals? It may be that you are a baby boomer who still questions authority—that’s fine, so do I. I think we should. But I hope we find that questions have answers, that we find an authority in our lives that is unlike any other, because that authority has something to do with the passage that Ruth read for us from Philippians: being of

¹ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Part II The Book of Order.* F-1.0201.

the same mind, the same love, doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves; not looking to your own interests, but to the interests of others; being of the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself. That's not the kind of authority that is common in our world today. But that is the authority of Christ, that of example, the example of love and self-giving. And so whether it is in church or in our families or our professions, we seek the mind of Christ. Because he is the authority that loves us. That gave himself out of love. That calls us to give ourselves to one another in love. Even if we are different. Even if we disagree. Even if we are uncomfortable. Even if it costs us something. It cost him his life. It will cost us our hearts.