

QUESTIONING AUTHORITY

Sermon, September 28, 2014

Texts: Matthew 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-11

At Presbytery two Saturdays ago, the moderator called attention to a somewhat newly released survey from the Barna Group entitled "America's Most and Least Bible Minded Cities." From the Barna Group website:¹ *"From its place in schools, to the public square, to people's individual lives, the current and future role of the Bible in U.S. society is an often-debated topic. A new release from Barna Group shows how this debate plays out regionally and takes a look at how 96 of the largest cities in the nation view the Bible. The report ranks the most and least 'Bible-minded' cities by looking at how people in those cities view the Bible. The study is based on 42,855 interviews conducted nationwide and was commissioned by the American Bible Society. Individuals who report reading the Bible in a typical week and who strongly assert the Bible is accurate in the principles it teaches are considered to be Bible-minded. This definition captures action and attitude — those who both engage and esteem the Christian scriptures." (emphases mine ... slc)*

Do you know what city came in dead last in the nation at number 96? Providence, Rhode Island.

The context of today's Gospel lectionary is that the chief priests and the elders were the religious authorities, and they were used to being treated as such. But there was a new teacher in town, and in their eyes, He was undermining their authority. They understandably viewed Jesus as a threat. They asked Him a question, *"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"*

We need to look back earlier in the chapter to see what they are referring to by "these things." Matthew 21 begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem on the back of a donkey with the people praising Him, waving palm branches and singing "Hosanna," hailing Him as the coming King, the Messiah, the son of David. That was the first Palm Sunday, which places this little scene in today's reading in the last week of Jesus' earthly life. According to Matthew, after Jesus arrives in town to the enthusiastic welcome of the crowds, the first thing He does is to go straight to the Temple. What He finds going on at the Temple apparently breaks His heart and makes Him angry, and He has *[what I referred to last spring as] a Temple Tantrum!* Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, has an explosive fit of anger when He sees how the Temple is being grotesquely misused. He goes around aggressively and furiously overturning tables where people are selling things, driving people and animals out with a whip. In verse 13, He bellows, *"It is written, My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers!"*

There is a sermon in itself here, but note Jesus is *not* flailing away at the political authorities or leading the charge against the occupying Romans, as everyone that Palm Sunday thought the Messiah would do. No, Jesus does not direct His righteous anger toward the political or military "establishment." He directs His divine attention to the center of worship, as if to say, *"This is where the housecleaning must begin. If anything is going to change, this place must have its priorities in order!"* And if people in last place Providence are ever going to become Bible minded, Bible literate, if people in last place Providence are ever going to *"...engage and esteem the Christian scriptures,"* it has to start in the centers of worship! Do we read our Bibles at least weekly (*and not w-e-a-k-l-y!*)? Do we assert the Bible as accurate in the principles it teaches? Do we "engage and esteem" the Christian scriptures?

We then read, v. 14, that the blind and the lame came to Jesus at the Temple, and He healed them. Matthew tells us there's another group of people who came to Jesus at the Temple, and that's the children. The children are there, crying out in the temple! There they are, crying out "Hosannah" to our Savior, alongside and in imitation of their parents. The children are there, along with the lame and the blind. These are three categories of people, by the way, whom the chief priests and the elders had agreed were to be *excluded* from the Temple. But the lame *need* people to help them to walk and get well; the blind *need* people to help them see what they cannot see on their own, and children *need* to be alongside their parents in the houses of worship, imitating their parents in worship and obedience and discipleship if they are to grow in wisdom and faith as well as stature.

So, these are among the "things" prompting the questioning from the leaders of the temple. Here comes this man from the backwoods of Israel, a nobody from this small rural area in the north called Nazareth, and He has come in and put a stop to things the so-called religious leaders should have put a stop to long before! And He is bringing people into the Temple who need to be there! The religious leaders reluctantly see truth in His words, they see authority in His actions, they see the people's overwhelmingly positive response toward Him ... but rather than learn from Him, they choose to play politics. And so they ask Jesus this loaded question trying to entrap Him. If He replies He is doing these things by His own authority, well, they can try to dismiss Him in the eyes of the crowd as a misguided, uncredentialed, itinerant, self-taught zealot who passes himself off as a "rabbi" or teacher. THEY had been to schools, THEY had been to seminaries, THEY had the degrees and the official backing of the Temple. Jesus had none of these credentials. And should He say He is doing these things by God's authority, then they can

¹ see <http://cities.barna.org/americas-most-and-least-bible-minded-cities-2/>

try to dismiss Him in the eyes of the crowd as (at worst) a nut case, or (at best) as a self-proclaimed, self-righteous egotist who thinks He alone speaks for God. "Who does he think *he* is?"

Now, Jesus knows the answer to the question they have asked. He *IS* the Authority! He is God incarnate, God in human form, as so eloquently expressed by Paul in today's Epistle lectionary reading. When Jesus bellowed earlier, "*My house will be called a house of prayer,*" He wasn't just preaching! He really was saying, "*My House.*" Paraphrased, "*THIS IS MY HOUSE! And the things going on here supposedly in God's name are a travesty!*" But He knows they won't hear this answer. He also knows they really aren't seeking a real answer to their question. This is an issue of power and privilege and position and control. This is about getting and keeping their way; they really aren't interested in what is genuinely true, and right, and good, and holy in the eyes of God. So He fires a question back at them. He asks them about John the Baptist who came earlier and also was given a difficult and rocky treatment by these same religious leaders. "*Where did John and his baptism come from?*" Jesus asked, "*Was it from heaven, or from men?*"

He turns the tables and puts them in the same position in which they had tried to put Him (*you might say they started out questioning Authority, and Authority Incarnate ended up questioning them!*). Whichever way they answer will cause difficulties. The content of the subsequent discussion they have among themselves is really irksome to me, and I'm sure it is to you. They didn't talk about the actual issue! They didn't honestly address the question! They didn't discuss whether any of them really believed what John was doing or saying had any merit. They were only concerned with how their answer would make them look in the eyes of others. They looked at it purely from a political perspective. "*If we say, 'from heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say 'From men' -- we are afraid of the people, for they all held that John was a prophet.*" Or to paraphrase, "*How should we answer this? If we say that John's baptism was from God then we'll look bad for not listening to John. If we say it was from men, then we'll look bad for denigrating a person the people like.*" They saw it as a no-win situation; no matter how they answered, they would be in trouble.

So they gave the lamest of all lame answers, and replied, "We do not know."

Personally, I can't *stand* that. They dodged the question! How cynical. How depressing. How sad. This is a deliberate assumption of functional ignorance among religious and political leaders for the sake of expediency, not truth. These are *leaders*, religious leaders, and they didn't have the integrity and honor to speak up, to assert what they believe, to personally own their convictions, to give a straight answer, to engage in constructive dialogue; in the safe anonymity of their little group no one chose to take a personal stand and identify with their beliefs and own their convictions. That is the attitude of cowardice, not conviction; the attitude of expediency, not integrity. It is a shameful attitude, especially for those who profess to be leaders. We need leaders who are people of integrity who speak and act from Godly conviction, not cowardice. We need leaders who stand for what is right and good and true, not for what is inoffensive, expedient, or plays to the crowd. We need leaders who don't get their values from majority consensus, but from divine authority. Jesus treated this reply with the bemused contempt it deserved. If they would not answer, He told them He would not answer their question, either.

Jesus then launches into this story about a man who had two sons. The father went to the first and said, "*Son, go and work today in the vineyard.*" The son responded, "No." Later, though, this son changed his mind and went and did what his father requested. Then the father went to his other son and said the same thing. This one answered, "O.K. Yes, sir!" but he never actually went to work; he never did what his father asked. Then Jesus asked a simple, almost rhetorical, question: "*Which of the two did what his father wanted?*" Well, duh. "*The first,*" they answered. Then Jesus delivered His punch line, "*I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.*" That really was a punch line, and the religious authorities were the ones who were punched. These elite leaders looked down with smug and graceless arrogance upon such people, thinking, "*Prostitutes. Tax collectors. These people can't change. Leopards can't change their spots.*"

But Jesus identifies Number One Son with the tax collectors and the prostitutes, people who may have made really bad decisions earlier in their lives and headed off in wrong directions, but then responded to the divine Authority and found by the power of grace that they really could change! And they repented. They realized they were heading wrong directions and turned around, responding to the gracious call to obedience given by John and Jesus. Number Two Son is that son who said "Yes" to his father, like these religious leaders of the day who more than likely had one day sincerely said "Yes" to God. They may have started off in the right direction, but somehow got so sidetracked they could not even recognize the God they supposedly served when He showed up right there among them, in the flesh. And Jesus took, not the religious leaders, but the repentant tax collectors and the former prostitutes and the common fishermen and other ordinary, but faithful, people as His disciples, people who responded to His authority ... and then watched them grow into the real leaders of His church.

And at the end of Matthew's Gospel, He tells them, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given unto Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.*"