

“A Question of Authority”. Mark 11:27-33. June '21 @ Hope

The pulpit is a very privileged place. First, it is where I am privileged to tell the greatest story ever told. But it also has an interesting *position* in our culture. It has been called the last bastion of the monologue. Most of us have listened to many, many sermons, but I daresay that you have never heard anyone speak up and challenge the authority of the preacher. You've never heard anyone say, “Hey! *Wait a minute! How can you say that? That doesn't even make sense. Where do you get the authority to say these things?*” No doubt you have had questions, deep thoughtful questions about what the preacher is saying, but you have never felt comfortable in openly challenging the preacher. It just isn't done.

I suspect that the same dynamic, the same social pressure was present at the time of Jesus. I doubt if people felt comfortable with questioning the statements of someone who spoke as a prophet or preacher....which makes this text all the more interesting and challenging.

What could have motivated these religious authorities, these priests and teachers of the Law, to openly challenge the ministry of Jesus? It must have been something really serious. And you are correct. In fact, it is more serious than you would ever imagine. It is more serious than even those priests and elders themselves might have imagined.

This is the kind of text, the kind of event that has to be peeled back a layer at a time, like peeling an onion. At first reading, at **first glance we might simply find ourselves amused or entertained**. We know that Jesus's popularity was a real problem for the religious establishment, and so we are delighted to hear Jesus silence his accusers with this classic rhetorical device of answering a question with a question. *You want to know the source of my authority? Well, what do you think about John the Baptist?* Gotcha! You answer my question and I'll answer yours. The authorities don't want deal with that. This thing with John is very sensitive. Like politicians, they rise and fall with the popularity of the crowds and they know how the crowds feel about John. The masses considered John a real prophet of God and he had pointed to Jesus as the Messiah! This is going to be awkward. This is not a subject they want to talk about. So they slink away. Back to the drawing boards. Jesus wins that round. Way to go, Jesus! And we love it.

But we have **to probe a little deeper than that**. We have to peel another layer from the onion. As I said before, what could have motivated these authorities to challenge Jesus so openly? It must have been really serious. Well, as is so often the

case, **when you are puzzled about human behavior, you just follow the money trail.**

We have to remember that this event took place very soon after Jesus had **caused a near riot by his righteous, angry upsetting of the money-changing booths in the temple.** The whole sacrificial system of temple worship depended on the sale of animals in the outer court and the necessary money exchanging as people came from many places with different monetary systems. It was a well established system and it was also very profitable for the religious establishment. The rulers and teachers of the Law had been distressed enough by the great popularity of Jesus, with people raving about his insightful stories, his profound teachings, and the wonder of his miracles, healings and claims that he had even raised a girl from the dead. But now he comes rampaging through the temple and condemns the sacrosanct, time-honored marketplace which had become so important in their religious system. Jesus considered it an abomination. They had turned what was designed to be a humble and holy thing, offering sacrifice for sin, into an opportunity for profit and exploitation. As the saying goes, now he had stopped preaching and started meddling. As I said, if you are confused about how people behave, just follow the money trail. No wonder they said, "*Where do you get the authority to do this? Who do you think you are?*" Now this was getting serious.

But it is when you **peel back another layer that you get to the real issue.** **When you look at this from the broad perspective of the entire New Testament, putting it into the whole scheme of biblical revelation,** you begin to see that Jesus was challenging not only the way the sacrificial system of temple worship had been exploited for profit. He wasn't just upset about price gouging for sheep and turtle doves and outrageous exchange rates, with kick-backs for temple authorities, **I think he was challenging the whole idea of getting in God's good graces by our own efforts..** the whole concept of animal sacrifices as payment for sin, a means of getting right with God. **He was laying the groundwork for the proclamation of a New Covenant, an entirely new and different way to understand our relationship with God.**

**The Old Covenant,** we remember, was a pretty straightforward arrangement...keep my Laws and I will shower you with blessings. You expend your energies in righteous deeds and I will look with favor upon you and your children. "*If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations of the earth you will be my treasured possession.*" (Exod. 19:5).

This is the way things stood for centuries. Obey and you will be blessed...disobey and you will be cursed. The whole system of atonement through sacrifices was built on this premise. But then prophet Jeremiah said a startling thing...a remarkable revelation..” *The time is coming, declares the Lord, that I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of David. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them....This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts, I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor saying, Know the Lord, for they will all know me, from the least to the greatest, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. “ (Jer. 31:31-34)*

Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection, is the fulfillment, the embodiment of this New Covenant. This is the heart and core of our faith. He became the “*once for all sacrifice*” for the sins of the world.

He enables us to live with a clear conscience, not dragging our sins around with us, like a bag of stinking garbage, but holding our heads high, full of hope and consolation. If our heavenly Father remembers our sin no more, then so can we. We can put it all behind us and step forward as a new creation, washed clean in our Baptismal waters, and eager to live a sacrificial life, offering ourselves as a living sacrifice, not to gain the favor of the righteous and wrathful God, but to express our thanksgiving and praise for the gift that has been freely given to us. Make no mistake, the New Covenant involves sacrifice..first the sacrifice made on a bloody cross, which was entirely adequate, and then the on-going, perpetual sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise which we make in response to God’s grace and promise.. sacrificial living which will always be inadequate and disproportionate to what we receive.

Now the **question of the day is this...are we really living as beneficiaries of the New Covenant?** Has this new way of thinking really been absorbed into our consciousness and our daily habits? Do we rise on a Sunday morning thinking ‘this is the day I get to gather with fellow Christians and thank and praise the God who has made me His own. ..or does worship seem more like burden, an intrusion on our precious time, something I know I should do, but not really what I want to do. When we fill our offering envelopes is it a conscious, joyful expression of thanksgiving for the remarkable blessings we have received? Or is it a struggle to

do what we feel obligated to do, after all, the bills must be paid and I made a pledge, with the fleeting thought that perhaps if I give more, then God will bless me more?

If we are entirely honest we must confess that the haunting refrains of the Old Covenant are always whispering to us..”keep my commandments and I will bless you...break my commandments? Well , you know the consequences.” It is the principle that guides the world, you get what you deserve... the principle that undergirds every other world religion.

In sharp contrast, the New Covenant, built on Grace alone...grace free and boundless..well. St, Paul calls it foolishness. “ *the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.. but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God...the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.*” ( 1 Cor: 18 ff.)

It is this foolishness, this wonder of God’s amazing grace and pardon through the great sacrifice of His Own Son, that fills our hearts with hope and peace and joy. This is what motivates our worship and praise and our sacrifices of time, talent and treasure.

May the Spirit of God continue to nurture and strengthen our faith so that each day becomes an opportunity to pray, praise and give thanks.

AMEN