



Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Exodus 17:1-7

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

God's blessings, friends. Warm greetings from Coeur d'Alene, as the weather turns toward the crispness of Fall. We give thanks for rain and for relief from the smoke that came with the devastating fires across the West. We continue to pray for firefighters, and for all people and so many of God's creatures affected by the fires. And we continue to pray for all healthcare workers and essential workers during the continuing days of this pandemic, and for health in our region.

I love Jesus' way of dealing with "Gotcha" people. You know, "Gotcha" people? The folks who look for ways to trap, shame, or embarrass leaders, or to push them up against a wall? Folks who do this not just with leaders, but with family members, group members, neighbors, work colleagues?

Along the way through the Gospel of Matthew, the religious rulers and guides of the day were trying to press Jesus into a corner. Now, we come onto this encounter between Jesus and these religious rulers – in the days immediately after Jesus entered Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna!" and then drove the market sellers and buyers out of the temple. Jesus is more than a bit annoyed. The religious rulers are not at all happy. They come at Jesus with an accusing question: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you that authority?" Today, we might say it as, "Just who do you think you are, big shot?" or "Who died and made you king?" The question isn't meant to seek insight or invite information to illuminate. The question is meant to push Jesus up against a wall.

It strikes me as a scene a little like the White House Press Room, with any president. And we have all seen political leaders and their staff respond to questions by answering completely different questions and diverting away from what they feel are challenges to their authority.

But don't think that this is just a game played by journalists. It's played by politicians with each other. It's played in offices and businesses. It's played in families. It is played by everyday people, against each other and against the leaders they have followed. So, this kind of thing shows up in our reading from Exodus this week, as the Hebrew people continue to follow Moses' leading through the wilderness. They have been given food – daily bread and daily protein – by God. But they are now grumpy about the water supply. And, just listen to the tone of the question. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" It's as if to say, "Why should you still be in charge?" "Look what you've done to us. Who died and made you king?"

Anyway, back to the scene between the religious leaders and the disciples. Jesus doesn't divert, deny, or change the subject. Jesus takes a different approach. He responds, like he often does, with a question of his own – and he says that he will only answer their question if they answer his. His question is equally direct, and equally pressing them into a corner. “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” Today, Jesus might say it as, “Was John doing God's work, or just making up something of his own, when he baptized people?” or, basically, “Was John for real as a servant of God, or not?”

I wonder what it would be like for a president or congressional leader to answer journalists with a question rather than an answer.

We tend to press leaders into the space of being the Everything Answer-Man or Answer-Woman. Then, we ask questions that are not intended to learn but intended to accuse or at least to imply strongly what we believe is the right answer. And, when leaders deflect, or lie, or shift blame, or change the subject, or waffle, we take that as a moment to lose faith in them.

So, it is interesting that Jesus stays with the subject and doesn't try to deflect or avoid the heat – instead, he reflects the heat right back at these religious leaders.

And now, we get to see how the religious leaders' response – and we get a glimpse inside their heads as they talk together about how to respond. They consider the two options. “We could say John was doing God's work, but that leaves us wide open for Jesus to ask why we didn't listen to him.” “But if we say John was just making it all up, then we will face the crowd's anger.” So, they opt for avoiding the subject. Rather than facing the heat of making an honest choice, they think too much about the responses they will have to deal with, and just choose to plead ignorance. You know, plead ignorance? Like, “I did not know anything about that situation,” or “I was never informed.” They chose the path of denial.

And because they chose the path of denial and of withdrawing from honest engagement, Jesus closes the door to their question. Because, Jesus sees that they will not hear or internalize any response he gives them, and they will only use his response for their own gain. Jesus sees that their thinking is warped entirely by political machinations. They are not motivated by political concern, in the sense of their being concerned for the body politic (or the whole people); rather, they are caught up in political machinations to attempt to maneuver power and public opinion. Because they are stuck in this whole way of thinking, they are unable to enter a different way of seeking and honoring the truth.

But Jesus does not leave things dangling there, with unanswered questions. He presses on, into the heat even more. This time, he presses on with a story that is remarkably straightforward. Two sons, each doing other than what they said they would do – one who said he would help but didn't, and another who said he wouldn't help but did. Which son did what the father wished? Of course it is the second son. But this means that people are to be known by the fruits they bear, the actual things they do that have real consequences in the world – not by the words they say as promises or threats. And the analogy to the life of faith is not lost on these

religious leaders or the surrounding crowds. Jesus is noting how true love for the father was demonstrated by the son who changed his mind from initial belligerence and resistance to a choice of honoring his father's wishes – and how false love was shown by the son who promised to do what the father wished but then drifted off and chose to neglect what he had pledged to do. True turning to God means leaving our prior belligerence and resistance, our habits of refusal and rebellion, and relinquishing our stubbornness and instead choosing to give ourselves over to God's desire. So, those who saw their own rebellion and resistance for what it was and who chose to let go and follow Jesus – those tax collectors and prostitutes and Gentiles who seemed so ugly to the nicely and comfortably religious – were finding the gates of the kingdom of heaven opening wide for them. And the gates were opening because they were willing to seek with open hearts and believe.

The way Jesus engages directly with people is a way of courageous directness that holds up a mirror for people to catch a glimpse of themselves. It is a way that we would all do well to learn.

Of course, the best way to begin to learn this is to allow Jesus to ask these kinds of direct questions of ourselves and to let these stories and parables of Jesus hold up a mirror to our own lives, our own selves, our own habits and ways of being. Maybe one of the most daring ways to begin to learn is to ask Jesus to help us see ourselves honestly and fully. The courage we learn in that process of self-honesty will prepare us for the courageous directness that Jesus has with others.

And, what Jesus invites us all to is the path that he himself walked – the path of self-emptying. Jesus invites us to give up our stubbornness and resistance to God's call and desire for us, to give up our resistance to seeing ourselves honestly, to give up our fear of the crowd and of any confrontation, and to give ourselves over to God's desire. To follow Jesus in giving ourselves for the sake of the world.

Come, follow Jesus, the courageous, the vulnerable, the One who gave all away for our sake.