

**Question Authority**  
**Matthew 21:23-32**  
**Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, September 28, 2008**

The leaders of the religious establishment were livid. Jesus dared trespass on their turf not once but twice! Earlier he chased money changers out of the temple accusing them of turning his Father's house into a den of thieves. Then he had the audacity to return to the scene of the crime, as if nothing happened.

This time they were ready for him, demanding, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" In other words, "How dare you come here and question our ways. Just who do you think you are?"

From the start of his ministry the common people both recognized and admired Jesus' unique authority, for as Matthew explained his teaching was different from the stale, rote pabulum they got from the scribes and Pharisees. His lessons were fresh and exciting, striking a chord and bringing dead religious dogma back to life. Jesus made God real because he was real, thereby drawing disenfranchised people back into the reality Jesus called "the Kingdom of God. Jesus' simple parables and common sense approach to life and faith reawakened the divine spark in their hearts and minds but also threatened to undermine the entrenched religious establishment's monopoly on faith and practice in Judea.

So, intimidated by Jesus, they went on the attack. "By what authority are you doing these things?" How could this hick from Galilee not wither under the force of such a lethal question that would leave him confused and sputtering.

But Jesus didn't bite. Staying assertive and calm Jesus asked them a question, that if answered honestly could open the floor to an open dialogue. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was John a false prophet?"

Afraid to answer, they sputtered, "We don't know." They knew if they said John was a religious charlatan (which they believed) they'd lose credibility with the people. If they said John was a bonified prophet, they'd be criticized for opposing him. That's why they played dumb, allowing Jesus to answer, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

What we have in this confrontation is the classic struggle between God and man that began in the Garden of Eden. "Who's in charge, who's the boss, me or God?" That's the question, if wrongly answered drives an even deeper wedge between God and us.

Let's be honest, no one likes authority. Most of our favorite stories told in books and movies are about rebels fighting against the system, and we usually cheer them on.

Some like to paint Jesus as the consummate rebel, always questioning authority and challenging the status quo. But we need to remember Jesus was not a rebel without a cause, instead Jesus always placed himself under the ultimate authority of God.

The record shows Jesus wasn't antiauthority, urging anyone who'd listen to do their own thing. Just the opposite, Jesus taught obedience was one of the essentials of the full, abundant life. Our job as disciples is not to question, but to obey God's call to deny ourselves, pick up our crosses and follow Jesus wherever he takes us, especially when we don't want to go there.

But what does that mean to deny yourself, shoulder your cross and follow Jesus? Let's explore.

First: "Deny yourself." It's not all about you, your wants, your hopes, your dreams. Instead it's all about making God's wants, God's hopes and God's dreams yours. I think things go haywire when we don't want God to ask too much from us. We'd rather have others kow-tow to us; we don't like the responsibility of being good neighbors and our brothers' keeper. We get irritated when the call to sacrifice ourselves cancels out our desire for pleasure. And yet, it's when you submit to God's authority and deny yourself, even when it costs you time, energy and money, you both receive a blessing and become a blessing as your neighborhood becomes a new outpost for God's Kingdom.

Next: "Pick up your Cross." There's a lot of confusion over what this means. Your mother-in-law isn't the cross you are called to bear, neither is poor health or bad luck. Your cross is your willingness to let your sinful attitudes and behaviors, your old, false self, the person you have become outside of God's authority, to slowly wither away. Listen again to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*. "When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come with him and die." Picking up your cross means you are ready to let your desires, hopes and dreams be crucified with Christ and replacing them with your desire to obey your thirst to do God's will.

Finally: "Follow Jesus." This means even before you get out of bed in the morning you recommit to the servant lifestyle. Wherever you go, whatever you do, make sure Jesus is ahead of you. Don't get ahead of him, don't fall behind; don't wander off into places and situations you shouldn't be. Instead keep close to Jesus, keep him in your thoughts, always be aware of his presence and when you hear him say either, "Do this," or "Don't do this," (you know what I'm talking about) don't question his authority and become a rebel without a cause. Simple obey.

Of course denying yourself, shouldering your cross and following Jesus is the ideal we don't always live up to. This reality is illustrated in Jesus' parable of the two sons.

One son agrees to work in the vineyard but doesn't, the other son refuses, but ends up working anyway. "Which of the two," Jesus asked, "did the Father's will?"

Of course the second son, despite his initial rebellious attitude finally submitted and did his father's will while the first son who said yes went off on his own.

All of us can identify with both sons. We know what it's like to make a commitment but then something better comes along so nothing happens and others are left holding the bag. Other times we refuse the request but then surprise ourselves and everybody else by showing up to do our part, only because God kept calling us in the night.

So is that how God gets us to do things we'd rather not do, pricking at our conscience, wearing us down night and day until we cry "Uncle"?

Sometimes, but I think God's really wants to get us not just to do his will but to be his children. Catch the difference? Yes, God wants to use us to make good things happen, but God especially wants to claim our true identity: we are his sons and daughters, created in his image, with the potential to grow in our humanity and become more like our brother, Jesus.

Paul hits the nail on the head when he urged the Philippians, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interest of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...he humbled himself and became obedient..." (Philippians 2:4-8)

A few weeks back during the children's sermon I explained why ministers wear collars. Clericals symbolize the collars worn by slaves. When you saw a slave wearing a collar you knew that slave belonged to his master. I also confessed when I wear my collar in public, I'm on my best behavior, because I want others to know I belong to Jesus and I take him seriously. And one more important thing, my collar reminds me of my true identity: I know I'm a child of God and I want to please him by serving my neighbor, keeping my commitments and always placing myself under his authority with the hope that the Holy Spirit is helping me become more like Jesus, who always did his Father's will.

Today's sermon title is "Question Authority." Question your authority and the authority of the powers and principalities of this world, but never question the authority of God. Instead, embrace it to solidify your true identity. Make that commitment knowing God has already committed to you, for you are his beloved child, born into this world for a sacred purpose that is being revealed to you as you accept his authority and accomplish his will.