



"You Did Not Change Your Minds"

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Authority. Authority is what provides order in many aspects of our lives. Authority is also what causes problems in our lives when it is questioned. When we like what those in authority are doing or saying, all is well. When we don't, we protest.

As we just heard in the gospel for today, this question of who has authority, is not just a question that is asked in our daily lives. Authority certainly plays a big role in our earthly lives. Authority can either feel like a heavy weight that has been placed on us or we can be thankful for the freedom it gives to us. God himself, who is THE author of all things, spoke words of his authority to protect Adam and Eve when he told them, "You may eat freely of any tree in the garden, but the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." With a whisper of temptation from the serpent, God's authority was questioned, and Adam and Eve did as they pleased.

Cain did not like hearing that the Lord favored Abel's offering from the soil over his offering from his flock. Cain's dislike for God showing his authority grew into hatred for Abel, so he decided to take the matter of authority into his own hands and killed his brother. This is another example of one of God's chosen people rebelling against God's authority to do as he wished, and we haven't even turned to the third page in the bible.

*Scripture is not limited to a few individual examples of this rebellion. We are reminded that all of God's chosen people had turned from him before God chose Noah and his three sons and their wives to be saved from the flood. Putting a rainbow in the sky was not to remind people to never rebel again. The bow was put in the sky to remind God not to destroy his people again. And it was not long after this that all of God's chosen people were in need of some order once again. So, God chose Moses to lead his people and called him up on Mount Sinai to receive the heavy tablets of stone summarizing God's authority into what we know as the 10 commandments. At the top of the list was, "You shall have no other gods." Before Moses got down from the mountain with these words of authority, God's chosen people were already busy at work **making other gods.***

The fourth commandment is not limited to the authority that parents have over their children to keep them safe, but it also refers to anyone having authority. It refers to teachers having authority over their students. This commandment refers to the authority or chain of command that is often in place where you work. I don't think you will have any trouble thinking of your own examples of where authority has been helpful to you and you certainly will be able to think of an even longer list when you have questioned if someone has authority. You might want to say under your breath if you want to keep your job or out loud if you don't care, "And who made you God?"

This is what the chief priests and scribes wanted to say to Jesus as we just heard in the gospel reading for today when Jesus entered the temple to teach. They changed the wording of "And who made you God?" into a form of political correctness by saying, "By what authority are you doing these things?" Entering the temple to teach was not Jesus' first offense that offended the chief priest and scribes who felt they held the authority regarding what happens in the temple.

I had enjoyed my Church Leadership class. Professor Strickland had many experiences to share in the churches where he was well liked and others where he had a short time of serving. Jesus would have done well to follow Dr. Strickland's advice of not upsetting the usual order of how things were being done in the church when you first begin your call. As he gave this advice, several examples came to my mind when pastors got into trouble early in their ministry by suggesting something that was different from what the congregation was used to. Even if it was the right thing to do.

Teaching in the temple was not Jesus' first offense that caused the leaders to question his authority. Before this happened, we are told that Jesus overturned the money tables in the temple. Jesus didn't sit back for a year to see how the finances were being handled in the temple like our professor would have advised. Jesus quickly exercised his authority to return the temple to a house of prayer from a house of money changers. Next, the chief priests and the scribes witnessed Jesus do another strange act of authority by cursing a fig tree. Jesus did this before first checking to see if this tree had been donated to the town in honor or memory of someone. They watched closely as Jesus destroyed a tree that was not bearing fruit and recalled when Jesus promised said he would do this. So, when Jesus entered the temple, they were afraid of what Jesus might destroy next. So, they interrupted Jesus in the middle of his class and asked, "And who made you God?"

It's too bad that Matthew didn't record a burst of laughter from Jesus or a long pause as Jesus stared at these authorities with a piercing stare. It's too bad, Matthew doesn't record what Jesus was thinking. Jesus must have thought, "Well, God made me God. I am God." The money that you thought was yours is mine. The tree that you planted, I created. Whatever I say, will happen. I didn't just receive authority to do these things. I am the author of all things." But none of these things happened. Instead Jesus responds that he would tell him where he got his authority if they would answer the question if the baptisms of John the Baptist were from heaven or humans.

It's no fun being put in the place where Jesus put the chief priest and scribes. It's no fun to be stuck between a rock and a hard place. It's no fun to be in trouble if you say one thing and just as much in trouble if you say another. But that's where Jesus put those who thought they were in authority and questioned his authority.

Not only did they not have an immediate answer, they delayed by saying we need to take it to our committee and discuss it. We need to run it up and down our chain of command. And when they did, they debated and argued with each other and the only safe answer they gave in hopes of protecting themselves was, "We don't know."

Then Jesus, whose teaching that was called into question, continues teaching the scribes and priests by telling the story of the man and two sons. He asks them which son did the will of the father, the one who said he wouldn't work in the vineyard but did or the son who said he would work in the vineyard but didn't. This question they could answer without taking it to committee for debate. They quickly responded that it was the son that went to work, albeit reluctantly.

What they failed to recognize was that it was by the father's word that the one son did what he was told. It was not because the one son after thinking about it for a while made a better decision than the other son. The one son had not changed his mind, but the mind of the one son was changed by listening to the father.

The chief priest and scribes did not connect the dots to the question Jesus raised regarding baptism. In baptism, it is not the decision of the baptized to be baptized or accept the baptism. In baptism, the heavenly Father speaks to the baptized with his word of claiming them. Baptism is not an event where you change your mind, but it is at that very moment that your mind is changed. It is not an event that after it happens must be given more time to see how it will play out. The only chain of command in baptism is the Holy Trinity where God speaks the word, Jesus is the word, and the Holy Spirit opens the ears of the newly baptized and there is no choice remaining. There is only faith and believing.

The title of the hymn of the day is good. "Change my heart, O God." It is not "Help Me Change My Heart". God has the authority to change hearts. It happens immediately when he speaks his word. God has seen another rainbow in the sky today. God has chosen not to destroy you but has chosen to change your heart. He has repented you of your sins. You are forgiven. Amen.