

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2020

PENTECOST 17

MATTHEW 21:23-32

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13

IN ORDER TO FULLY GRASP WHAT'S GOING ON IN TODAY'S GOSPEL LESSON, I WANT TO GIVE A BIT OF BACKGROUND. LET'S BACK UP A FEW VERSES BEFORE TODAY'S LESSON, JESUS GOES IN TO THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM AND OVERTURNS TABLES AND CHAIRS, THROWING OUT ALL WHO WERE SELLING AND BUYING THERE. THEN HE LETS IN THE NEEDY AND HEALS THEM, AND LISTENS TO THE CHILDREN AS THEY SING A SONG OF PRAISE TO HIM. HE LEAVES, AND WHEN HE GOES BACK THE NEXT DAY, AND THIS BRINGS US TO WHERE WE ARE IN TODAY'S LESSON – FROM THIS POINT ON, JESUS WILL BE FOUND CLASHING WITH THE AUTHORITIES – ALL OF THEM – THE CHIEF PRIESTS, THE ELDERS, THE PHARISEES, THE SADDUCEES AND THE SCRIBES. THEY HAVE ALL RALLIED TO CHALLENGE JESUS, AND THEY DO SO WITH QUESTIONS CREATED TO MAKE JESUS STUMBLE. AS YOU'LL SEE OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, JESUS ANSWERS EACH QUESTION BY TELLING A STORY. THE QUESTION WE DEAL WITH TODAY IS AUTHORITY.

JESUS, WAS CHALLENGED OFTEN ON HIS AUTHORITY - SO IN OUR TEXT TODAY, WHEN THE CHIEF PRIESTS AND ELDERS CAME TO HIM WHILE HE WAS TEACHING, AND ASKED THE QUESTION "BY WHOSE AUTHORITY ARE YOU DOING THESE THINGS?", THEY WERE EXPECTING THE NAME OF A TEACHER, A RABBI, A HUMAN ASSOCIATION THAT WILL BETTER HELP THEM UNDERSTAND JESUS.

THE QUESTION REALLY IS A FAIR ONE – AFTER, ALL, JESUS JUST WALKED INTO THEIR HOLY PLACE – THE PLACE WHERE THE CHIEF PRIESTS HAD RULED FOR CENTURIES, AND STARTED RE-ARRANGING THE FURNITURE – THEN HE COMES BACK AND STARTS TEACHING. YOU CAN UNDERSTAND WHERE THE TEMPLE LEADERS ARE COMING FROM – WONDERING WHAT THIS GUY IS UP TO – WHO DOES HE THINK HE IS, ANYWAY? SO, WHEN THEY ASK "BY WHAT AUTHORITY"? IT'S A LEGIT QUESTION.

SEE, IF YOU COULD IDENTIFY SOMEONE'S TEACHER, THEN YOU COULD BETTER GRASP WHAT THEY WERE ALL ABOUT. BUT THEIR ATTITUDE IS BASICALLY TELLING JESUS HE HAS NO RIGHT! THEIR PROBLEM IS, THEY WEREN'T OPEN TO THE TRUTH. THEY DIDN'T COME TO THE TEMPLE IN FAITH, BUT TO SEE THAT RIGHT ORDER AND LIVING BY THE LAW WAS KEPT.

WHERE THEY GET TAKEN BY SURPRISE IS THAT THEY'RE NOT PREPARED FOR JESUS'S ANSWER IN THE FORM OF HIS OWN QUESTION ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST. AND WHILE HIS ANSWER MAY SEEM INDIRECT, IT SURELY ISN'T EVASIVE, BECAUSE THE QUESTION OF JOHN'S AUTHORITY AND JESUS' ARE ESSENTIALLY THE SAME.

REMEMBER, IT WAS JOHN WHO PREPARED THE WORLD FOR JESUS. SO THOSE WHO ACKNOWLEDGE THE DIVINE ORIGIN OF JOHN'S AUTHORITY WILL DO THE SAME FOR JESUS, WHILE THOSE WHO FAIL TO ACKNOWLEDGE JOHN'S DIVINE AUTHORITY FAIL TO IDENTIFY THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS.

JESUS QUESTION IS A TEST AND THE CHIEF PRIESTS AND ELDERS HAVE ALREADY FAILED IT. THEIR RESPONSE NOW IS MERELY TO SAVE FACE AND PRESERVE THEIR OWN PERCEIVED AUTHORITY, AND WHAT BEGINS AS AN ATTACK ON JESUS BECOMES AN EXERCISE IN DAMAGE CONTROL.

WHEN WE QUESTION SOMEONE'S AUTHORITY, OR CHALLENGE THEIR RIGHT TO HAVE AUTHORITY, IT'S RARELY AN ISSUE OF OBJECTIVITY – USUALLY THERE ARE MOTIVES IN THE QUESTION. IN THE CASE OF OUR GOSPEL TODAY, THE ELDERS AND THE CHIEF PRIESTS WERE THREATENED BY JESUS, AND SO THEY WANTED TO – ACTUALLY - THEY NEEDED TO TRAP HIM – BUT IN THE ACT OF WHAT, EXACTLY? WHAT DO THEY HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH IN QUESTIONING JESUS' AUTHORITY?

PERHAPS ONE WAY TO FIGURE OUT THEIR MOTIVES IS TO TAKE A GOOD LOOK AT WHERE THIS IS HAPPENING – THIS STORY FOLLOWS CLOSE ON THE HEELS OF JESUS TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM, WITH THE CROWDS CHEERING HIM, AND A PARADE LIKE ATMOSPHERE ACCOMPANYING HIM. HE HAS ALREADY CLEARED THE TEMPLE OF THE MONEY CHANGERS, SO THESE ELDERS ARE WARY OF HIM AND KEEPING A CLOSE EYE ON HIM.

NOW HE'S BACK, IN THE TEMPLE ITSELF, - A VERY SYMBOL OF AUTHORITY AND POWER - PRIMARILY OF GOD. ARE THEY CHALLENGING HIS AUTHORITY AS IT SEEMS TO COME FROM GOD?

JESUS IN TURN PUSHES BACK AND PRESSES THEM WITH A TELLING QUESTION AND A TELLING STORY – THE STORY OF THE 2 SONS AND IN ASKING WHICH OF THE SONS DID WHAT THE FATHER WANTED, THEY REPLY WITH THE OBVIOUS ANSWER – THE ONE THAT OBEYED. AND BY

FORCING THEM TO GIVE THAT ANSWER, JESUS COMPELS THEM TO ACCEPT THEIR RESPONSIBILITY AS RELIGIOUS LEADERS.

SEE, THE SON WHO ORIGINALLY SAID, NO TO WORKING, BUT THEN CHANGED HIS MIND, IS LIKE THOSE WHO WERE DISOBEDIENT TO THE LAW, SUCH AS THE TAX COLLECTORS AND PROSTITUTES. BUT WHEN JOHN ARRIVED ON THE SCENE WITH A MESSAGE TO REPENT, THEY WERE OBEDIENT TO HIS MESSAGE AND TURNED THEIR LIVES AROUND.

BUT THOSE ELDERS AND CHIEF PRIESTS – ARE LIKE THE OTHER SON – WHO GAVE LIP SERVICE TO THE FATHER – YEP – I’LL DO WHAT YOU ASK – LOOKING GOOD ON THE OUTSIDE, BUT TOTALLY IGNORING THE MESSAGE OF GOD THROUGH JOHN.

BUT HERE’S THE THING – AND IT’S AN IMPORTANT THING – JESUS CONSIDERED **BOTH** GROUPS OF PEOPLE GOD’S CHILDREN. BUT IT WAS THEIR ACTIONS, NOT THEIR WORDS WHICH DETERMINED THE TRUE CHILDREN – THOSE MOST WILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN THE FATHER’S BUSINESS.

WHAT ABOUT YOU AND ME? BY WHAT AUTHORITY DO WE LIVE OUR LIVES? MOST WOULD SAY WE ASSIGN THAT AUTHORITY TO THE BIBLE, OR JESUS, AND I WOULD SAY, BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SAY. FOR IN ORDER FOR THAT TO BE TRUE, IT HAS TO BECOME ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL FOR HAVING AN ACTUAL EFFECT ON HOW WE LIVE OUR DAY TO DAY LIVES, AND HOW I USE THE WORD AS AN AUTHORITY UP AGAINST OTHER PERSPECTIVES AND VALUES IN MY DAY TO DAY LIVING.

IN OTHER WORDS, ACCORDING TO THE SECOND LESSON TODAY FROM PHILIPPIANS, AM I OF THE SAME MIND OF CHRIST? DO I HAVE THE SAME LOVE, DOING NOTHING FROM SELFISH AMBITION, CONCEIT, BUT IN HUMILITY, BEING IN HUMILITY, REGARDING OTHERS BETTER THAN MYSELF, LOOKING TO THE INTEREST OF OTHERS, CARING FOR OTHERS, EMPTYING MYSELF, BEING VULNERABLE. CERTAINLY NOT CHARACTERISTICS MOST OF US WOULD ASSOCIATE WITH AUTHORITY. AND YET, IN REALITY, IT’S WHAT WE’RE CALLED TO, ISN’T IT? IF THE AUTHORITY BY WHICH WE LIVE IS THAT OF CHRIST, PAUL SAYS STRIVE TO LIVE IN THE SAME MANNER AS CHRIST.

PUTTING IT ANOTHER WAY, LIVING TO THE FULLNESS OF WHAT I AM CALLED TO DO AND BE AS A BAPTIZED CHILD OF GOD, TURNING TOTAL CONTROL OF MY LIFE AND ALL THAT IS IN IT

OVER TO HIM? DO THE DAILY DECISIONS I MAKE REFLECT THAT HE IS INDEED THE TRUE AUTHORITY IN MY LIFE?

IT'S WHAT THE KINGDOM COME, ON EARTH, AS IN HEAVEN, LOOKS LIKE. IT'S WHAT, BEING MARKED WITH THE CROSS OF CHRIST AT BAPTISM, GIVES US THE AUTHORITY TO LIVE LIKE, IT'S WHAT MAKING YOUR OWN PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH ACTS LIKE. (AS 7 OF OUR YOUNG PEOPLE WILL DO THIS MORNING) AND THEN GO OUT TO WITNESS TO AND CHALLENGE THE WORLD AROUND US TO LIVE LIKE THIS.

SO, WHAT DO YOU SAY? BY WHOSE AUTHORITY DO YOU DO THE THINGS YOU DO? TODAY AS OUR CONFIRMANDS MAKE THEIR PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH, THEY STATE LOUD AND CLEAR - ONLY ONE AUTHORITY REALLY MATTERS IN THE BIG PICTURE – THAT OF GOD HIMSELF. ONLY ONE LIFE WORTH FOLLOWING AND IMITATING – ONLY JESUS HIMSELF – ONLY ONE GUIDE WORTHY OF GIVING ONE'S LIFE TO HEAR AND OBEY – THE HOLY SPIRIT – IN HIS NAME! AMEN.