

“A Lesson from the IRS and Other Unsavory Characters”

Matthew 21:23-32

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September 28, 2014

Our Gospel lesson this morning is a story on authority—who has it, where it comes from, and what it has to do with our relationship with God. Authority is given to us, usually from someone higher or with more power than ourselves. But there is another side to it—authority must also be given to you by people without a higher authority. For lack of a better term, I would say it is also given by people who are in a lower position than the one receiving authority.

One example that I learned about this week is the authority of a baseball team captain. Unlike other sports, major league baseball does not have a lot of captains. In fact, right now only three teams that has a player who has been honored as the team captain. Derek Jeter is one of them. I'm not a Yankees fan, but I am a fan of Derek Jeter. He is a player that is phenomenal on the field, but more importantly he has a strong character off the field. In his long career he has had no scandals, no temper-tantrums, not even a moment of losing his composure or professionalism in the face of a loss or insult. He is an all around great guy. Not even Red Sox fans have much to complain about him. And so, in recognizing these leadership skills on the field and off, the former owner of the Yankees named Jeter the Yankees team captain. Even though the owner had the power to bestow this title, Jeter really only had this new authority when his teammates treated him

as their captain. They were the ones who confirmed this position—who honored him by treating him as their leader, relying on him for advice, and looking to him as to how they should behave and play their game. So you see, in this way, authority comes from both above and below—from the boss and from your peers.

The way that the priests and the elders in Jesus' time understood authority was only coming from above. For them, their authority to be religious leaders was sanctioned by God through Moses and was directly handed down from generation to generation. They believed in a God that ordered the world by looking backwards, learning from the times and the people that came first. For them, their religious authority was a connection to God, and that connection came from the past, from their history. They understood authority as a linear thing, top to bottom.

When they questioned Jesus about his authority, they were trying to fit him into that same model. They wanted to know how Jesus fit into their history and therefore, what role God had given to Jesus. Jesus could not give them that answer, because for him authority meant a very different thing. For Jesus, authority did not come the outside, but it came from within. It was a personal decision and it was discovered through someone's direct relationship with God.

For the priests, they believed that you needed a sanctioned authority to be in a direct relationship with God. They thought you accessed God through the temple, and that the religious leaders had the most access, and therefore the most authority. Jesus believed that everyone had the potential to be in a direct relationship with God. He believed that God could be found out in the world, so the rules of the temple were no longer needed, and the rules around authority must be broken down.

It would have been incredibly difficult for the priests to understand that authority or a closeness to God could come from within yourself. This is why Jesus turns to the example of the tax-collectors and the prostitutes to make his point. These were people who were defined by their work and how they seemed to live their life. Jesus strips those definitions away and instead defines them by their willingness to know God and to love God. This is radical thinking!

Even today it is tempting to define people by their roles or by one characteristic. The tax collector has been turned into the IRS and everyone knows that if you work for the IRS, you must not have a soul. It's not just people who work for the IRS that get a bad rap. Everyone knows that dentists are scary, in and outside of their office. Everyone knows that librarians are quiet people and that even if you meet them in the grocery store you should keep your voice down. Everyone knows that when ministers are done with work, they go home and spend their evenings praying and reading the Bible. They never have any fun.

It is so easy to put people in boxes—to assign one personality or characteristic to them and then never allow them to break free of the stereotype or the assumptions the world has about them. When we do this we are no different than the priests. We look to an outside authority or way to define people and their role in the world.

Jesus does something different. Jesus defines people by the way they show their love for God and their understanding of what it means to be a part of God's kingdom. In the parable of the two sons, the son who changes his mind and eventually works in the field is the one who is more righteous because he gets it. It doesn't matter what he said before. It doesn't matter whether he was angry at his father, or tired from the previous

days work, or just wanting to push back on what was expected of him. He eventually gets it, and that is all that matters. His past does not define him in the same way that no one action or job or role defines us.

The first son claims his own authority in a way that had never been done before. Jesus' work and ministry was to help the disciples and their followers claim their own authority. Jesus was helping people say, "Yes, I am a part of God's kingdom. No I do not have the outside credentials or history that others might have, but I am a beloved child of God and that is all that matters."

The Good News of this Gospel message is that there is nothing that can keep us from God. There is no one on this earth that can keep us distant from God if we want to be close to God. There are no longer insiders and outsiders—we all have the same access. We all have the same opportunity. It is up to us to claim our own authority.

For some people, claiming their authority to know God means living a life of service in their community or volunteering their time in the church. For some of us claiming our authority means going to seminary and making the work of the church and God's people our life's work. For others claiming our authority means bringing a voice of love and respect for all people to the CEO's office or compassion and patience to the medical field. It means bringing creativity and awe to teaching. Or joy and comfort to our children. For Derek Jeter, claiming his authority meant giving his all to the game of baseball, both on and off the field. Each week when someone shares their "Pay It Forward" story, they are really telling us a story of how they claimed their authority and were stewards of God's treasure.

Jesus was big on telling people about God's radical welcome. And part of that means that it is up to us to welcome in all people—no matter who they are or where they are from or where they are on life's journey. Part of that welcome is in allowing people to claim their own authority and to define their own relationship with God. We can't do it for each other. It is too personal. And however someone identifies that or defines it for themselves, we are called to respect that. This means that it is up to us to take the opportunity to be in relationship with God, to claim our own authority. This is a part that no one else is responsible for. No one else can do it. This is the part that comes from within and is an expression of who you are, how you understand God, and who God is calling you to be in the world. This is the most difficult part, and it is perhaps the best part. Your authority is really a manifestation of God's love. Think about that for a second: you have the ability and the authority to demonstrate God's love in the world. And not just God's love, but also God's forgiveness and mercy, God's peace, and God's everlasting presence. There is nothing that stands between you and God. You have been invited by Jesus to participate in the kingdom of God. You have been invited to claim your authority.