

“By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?” the chief priests and the elders ask Jesus. The fingers are pointing at Jesus as these questions are asked. Who are you to come here and to challenge us? We are the ones who decide who has authority – we do, not you. How dare you upset our nice, orderly life with your questions!



Every day we ask this question as well – although perhaps not in an overtly religious setting such as a church. By what authority does this person pull me over for a traffic violation? By what authority does this person tell me I need to stay and work overtime? By what authority does this person tell me I need to pick my child up from daycare not later than 6 p.m. or there will be a penalty to pay?

We all operate “under authority” every day in every aspect of our lives. We may not think of it as such, but every action is either initiated or in response to the structure of our life and our relationships with a variety of people in a variety of settings.

Authority, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. It enables us to have structure and definition and to know our place in the world. It enables us to make choices about what we will do and what we will not do.

Some authority is explicit. The President of the United States is by explicit statement in our Constitution, the Commander in Chief of the armed forces.

Authority can also be implicit. We accept the statements of a news commentator or an elder statesman because we have found his or her statements to be truthful or persuasive in the past, so we believe what they say going forward.

Authority can also be delegated. A power of attorney for health care decisions can be given to a spouse, family member or advisor because we trust that he or she will take action consistent with our wishes if we are unable to speak for ourselves.

Authority, in and of itself, is not bad. The question Jesus poses in response to the chief priests and elders asks them to consider the source of authority of the baptism of John, and thus of Jesus himself.

Jesus knows the answer. The source of authority for John’s baptism and John’s actions is from God. But John was not an easy person to deal with for those who held secular and religious authority. He preached repentance – turning away from the powers of the world to a focus upon God and God’s dreams for humanity. John challenged the political and religious authorities of his day and for that challenge was beheaded.

Whether or not you liked John, whether or not he was easy to get along with, if you believe that John was a prophet sent from and by God, then the question becomes how you respond to that authority. The chief priests and the elders don't want to admit that John's authority came from God because they would then have to admit they put their own ideas about how life should be lived ahead of what God called them to be and to do.

John challenged their authority and thus challenged their way of life – the status quo and their position which carried with it authority to make decisions and pronouncements about what God was calling the people of Israel to be and to do.

Paraphrasing Kermit the Frog, "it's not easy being a prophet." Time and again in Israel's past, prophets have been reviled, banished or put to death for speaking the Word of God. We don't want to hear what may upset our way of life, especially if it means sacrificing something we hold dear but which we acknowledge in our heart-of-hearts takes us away from following God's Word.

And the chief priests and the elders also acknowledge that the crowd would act against them if they denied John's work was from God. They are afraid of popular opinion. And so they take the easy way out. "We don't know." They do know – but they aren't willing to stand up and say what they know. They aren't willing to acknowledge that they were wrong not to listen to what John had to say and then act in response to the authority given to John by God. And, by denying the authority granted to John by God, they also deny the authority of Jesus.

Self-awareness is something to be developed and not everyone has the same degree of it. The leaders interacting with Jesus know enough about themselves to see at least the "this world" risks if they deny that John's authority came from God. The crowd will denounce them. But do those leaders see the parallels when they denounce Jesus?

Jesus uses the parable of the two sons in hopes, perhaps, of helping the leaders begin to see who they are and what the consequences are of refusing the father's call.

God calls each of us to go into the vineyard and work for God. Our vineyards may be different as our gifts and talents are different. God has work for each of us to do. And God calls us to do that work.

But often we are like the two sons – sometimes one and sometimes the other. Sometimes when we are called we say we will – if only to get God off our back. After all, we have important things to do and responding to God takes our time and energy away from those important things.

And so we say, "yea, sure, I'll go" but then we carry on doing what we were doing thinking we've at least bought ourselves some time before God comes back to nag us again.

And sometimes we're like the other son who flat out says "no, I won't go; get someone else." But that little nudge at the back of our head tells us, "yes, it is our time to go and work in the vineyard and so we go."

God nudges and nudges and hopefully even though we've said "no, I won't go" there comes a point at which we see that what God calls us to do really does matter and we go.

There is a story about a woman with two small children. Like many parents, she wanted her children to have the best possible education. In her town, the best school was that run by the Roman Catholic Church. There was a problem, though, for this mother. They only accepted children who had been baptized. Her children were not, because she didn't really believe in God.

But she really wanted her children to go to this school, knowing how important a first rate education is to a child's future.

And so she came up with a plan. The Roman Catholic school didn't require that the children be baptized Roman Catholic- just that the children be baptized. She heard about a new church that was growing by leaps and bounds. She thought she could sort-of sneak in and get her children baptized there and then take them to the school. So she went- and she was overwhelmed by the people and the programs and the place and the spirit. She tried hard to keep herself aloof- reminding herself over and over that she was just in this church in order to get her children baptized so they could go to the school she had picked out.

Funny thing, the children were baptized. The children did end up going to the school she had picked out. But she- she stayed at that church and became one of its most ardent supporters and evangelists. God was calling her to go and work in the vineyard. At first she said "no- just let me get my children baptized." But over time, the love and support and the working of the Holy Spirit found a place deep in heart – and she knew that she had come home. First she said "no" but later she went to work in the vineyard.

Whether you've said "no" or you've said "yes", God calls to you and to me to go and work in the vineyard. Do not be afraid. The Holy Spirit lives and breathes within us, helping us to know the work that God would have us do.

When someone asks you, "by what authority do you speak" you can confidently answer: God has called me by name. God has work for me to do in this time and place. God is my authority. Alleluia, Alleluia. Thanks be to God.

16 Pentecost

Exodus 17:1-7; Ps. 78; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

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