

St. Luke Sermon (English) 1 October 2023

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 78:1-4; 12-16

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer. Amen.

In our gospel reading today, the chief priests and elders challenged Jesus' authority. And when I listened and meditated on it this week, my mind kept returning to something that happened to me during my first posting in Washington, D.C.

I was in my late twenties, having just returned from two assignments overseas and had taken up a position in the State Department's Bureau of Economic and Business. One of my first tasks was to attend an interagency meeting to discuss a policy issue that was primarily domestic, but which did have some potential international implications.

The meeting took place at the Treasury Department and was chaired by a senior Treasury official. Now, like most institutions, the Federal Government has a hierarchy. And when it comes to economic and financial issues, Treasury is at the top, followed by Commerce and others with economics as a central part of their duties. Agencies like State, which have economics as only a minor part of their authorities, get seats at the end of the table and are expected to speak only when spoken to.

However, being relatively inexperienced, I didn't know that—and I had something to say about the issue, so I raised my hand and spoke up. The Treasury representative clearly didn't appreciate my contribution. He paused, looked at me for a moment, then said, "You're from State, aren't you?" When I agreed, he then asked, "And where did you get your economics degree?"

Now, this was clearly a challenge to my authority, to my expertise, to my right to speak or, frankly, even to be present. However, in my inexperience and my arrogance, I looked him straight in the eye and said, "My economics degrees are from Berkeley and Yale, where did you get yours?"

The chair froze, speechless at my response. All around the room, there were gasps and a few nervous chuckles, and a whole lot of people looking up at the ceiling or down at their papers.

I thought I'd done a pretty good job, standing up to a person who was challenging my authority, questioning my expertise, trying to silence me. And for a moment, it felt good, really good.

However, over time, a couple of things became apparent. First, we had personalized the exchange, taking attention away from the problem in our attacks on each other, our

challenges to each other's authority. The chair ended the meeting quickly, and we never did get to discuss the policy issue. We both lost focus, and it took much longer to get a solution.

Second, while my smart-alecky response may have felt good in the moment, it destroyed any hope of ever developing a respectful working relationship. For the next two years, every time that group met, I had to do a lot of work beforehand, coordinating with other agencies, working around the chair, in order to be heard.

And we never did have a positive relationship—while he had set us off on a rocky footing by challenging my authority publicly, I had burned all my bridges by humiliating him in front of his work colleagues. Not one of my finer moments.

Jesus, however, gives us a very different—and much wiser—example of how to respond when one's authority is challenged. Rather than shutting down the conversation or answering back, Jesus opens up space by asking a question.

Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin? Interesting question. What do you think, was John's baptism from heaven or human? How would you go about answering this?

We could make a chart, kind of like a pro and con list, except this one would have "heaven" on one side and "human" on the other. We could list the arguments for each and see what conclusion we come to.

Or we could compare John's teachings and lifestyle to those of known heavenly prophets, to see if he was more like those inspired by God, or was he a charlatan, out to make a profit for himself? Since he spent his days in the wilderness eating honey and locust, I think we can safely say he wasn't in it for the money, no?

However, from our text, we see that the priests and elders did not follow these paths. They did not study the question, look for indications of God's work or for truth. Rather than respond to the question, they jumped into the potential implications of each answer.

If we say "heaven" then we'll have to explain why we didn't follow John's teaching. But if we say "human" the people will be upset. Rather than search for truth and accepting the results, they lost focus, they dithered, and, in the end, they responded that they didn't know.

Jesus realized that they weren't ready for a direct answer—neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. Jesus, however, did not lose focus, nor did he give up on the relationship. That's where the second part of the reading comes in.

Here, Jesus uses a familiar format—a story—to open up their minds (and, hopefully, ours as well). A man had two sons. He asked them to go to work in the vineyard. The

first said he wouldn't, but then reconsidered and went to work. The second said, sure, I'll go, but then didn't show up. Which one did the father's will?

They all answered that the first son, the one who may have had a negative reaction in the beginning, but was open to change, was able to reconsider, and to do right. The one who was not perfect, but who listened and learned. While the one who focused on himself, who knew what was right and even said what was right, but didn't act upon it, the one who wasn't willing to listen and learn, that's the one with the problem.

Jesus used this challenge to his authority as a teaching moment, not just for the priests and elders, but also for his disciples who heard the episode and for us today. Jesus remained focused on what these people needed to learn. He did not allow himself to be sidetracked, even when the priest and elders' dithering gave him the perfect opening for a putdown.

And throughout the interaction, Jesus remained aware of the importance of relationship. Now, I imagine that few if any of the priests and elders walked away from that interaction with a completely changed heart and mind. Rather, I suspect many of them continued to be irritated and angry. But I also imagine that at least one or two of them reflected on Jesus' words. They may have come back into their minds over the next few days or weeks. And, with that time, with that reflection, they may have been able to listen and to learn.

So, what is the lesson for us today, as we listen to these texts. What can we learn from Jesus' words. First, don't be a smart Alec—it may feel good for a moment but in the longer term, personalized challenges and put downs destroy relationships. They take the focus off the enormous amount of work that remains to be done, and instead redirects energy into negativity.

Instead, when we are challenged, when we face those irritating individuals who try to put us down, let's remember Jesus' example. Let's stay focused on our relationship with God and with each other. Let's respond with grace, holding space for listening, for learning and perhaps, like the first son, for development and change.

Amen.