

092522 "Authority to Serve" Matthew 21:23-27

A young boy traveling by airplane to visit his grandparents sat beside a man who happened to be a seminary professor. The boy was reading a Sunday school take-home paper, and the professor thought he would have some fun with the lad. "Young man," said the professor, "if you can tell me something God can do, I will give you a big, shiny apple." The boy thought for a moment and then replied, "Mister, if you can tell me something God can't do, I'll give you a whole barrel of apples!"

Today's passage, Matthew 21:23-27, talks about "authority."

The Oxford Dictionary defines authority as the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience. Authority has a crucial role in our lives. Who among you does not have any authority? In a shop, an owner has the authority as the owner. If you are a mother or a father, that gives you authority. In Korean community, age confers authority. Education confers authority. Family background can be a source of authority. However, in the Gospels, the authority Jesus spoke of and showed was a little different.

In order to understand today's passage, we need to know the context. Jesus entered Jerusalem with His disciples, and people greeted Him who was on a donkey, saying Hosanna. Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers were concerned. They were worried that many Jews who had gathered for the holiday would start a riot.

Then follows the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus. He kicked out all the merchants from the temple. He mourned that they turned a house of prayer into a den of robbers. That is the context of Matthew 21:23. There, high priests, scribes, and elders met the crowd. Some of them must have witnessed what happened the day before, and others probably have heard about it. They were thinking on their way to the temple, "Only we have the

authority regarding the temple. Who in the world did this? This is 'illegal.' This challenges the authority of Sanhedrin."

At the time, high priests, scribes, and elders were eligible to be the members of Sanhedrin, the highest court in Israel. They had substantial power both in religion and politics. In order to sell things in the temple, people had to pay a high fee. Selling the doves and sheep, money-changing for a higher exchange rate, and bribery all happened under their authority. It was they who decided whether or not the animals brought by ordinary people were blemishes or not. At that time, if the priests said that the animals brought by the people were defective, they had no choice but to pay a high price to buy the animals sold in the temple.

Because they interpreted the deed and teaching of Christ at the temple as challenging their authority, they asked Jesus a question about authority. This did not come out of the blue. But Jesus responds to the question of authority with a question of authority. He asks them, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

They thought about it. What is the problem with saying that John's baptism is from heaven? That is because John the Baptist has said Jesus is one whose sandals he is unworthy to untie, that He will baptize with the Spirit (unlike John the Baptist who baptizes with water), and that he saw the dove descending from heaven onto Jesus. They would have to acknowledge the authority of Jesus.

On the other hand, if they were to say that the baptism of John had no sacred authority, it would be against the crowd, many of whom believed John the Baptist as a prophet sent by God. Jewish leaders refused to answer the question about the authority of the baptism of John.

If you look carefully at the stories of Jesus written in the Gospels, Jesus always taught about “serving” when challenged to authority. Among many expressions that describe Christians, there is one description that we Christians are servant leaders. In other words, we have the authority of service. Our own denomination, the United Methodist Church, emphasizes servant leadership. In church, there are positions, another name for service, and they also have their appropriate authority. It’s not the authority that does not want to concede to others. It’s one that serves others first. Matthew 20:28 says, “just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

A young missionary, Herbert Jackson, was given a car to help him in his work. The car was a major asset, but it had one difficulty—it would not start without a push or a jump-start. Jackson devised a system to cope with the car’s inability to start. When he was ready to leave his home, he went to a nearby school and asked permission to bring some of the children out of class to help him push-start his car.

Throughout the day, he was careful to always park on a hill or to leave his engine running when he stopped for short visits. For two years the young missionary used what he believed was an ingenious method to enable him to use the car.

When poor health forced the Jackson family to leave the field, a new missionary arrived to lead the mission. When Jackson explained to the new missionary his methods for starting the car, the young man opened the hood and began inspecting. “Why, Dr. Jackson,” he interrupted, “I believe the only trouble is the loose cable.” He gave the cable a twist, pushed the switch, and the engine roared to life. For two years, Dr. Jackson had used his own devices and endured needless trouble. The power to start the car was there all the time—it only needed to be connected.

Dear beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, we too live in a busy world and sometimes forget this important thing. The fact that our lives need to be connected to God today and every day. God is the author of life, continually writing the story of our existence. Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, came to the world and set the example of service. We gain authority when we truly serve. Let us live with the authority that the Lord approves by serving others genuinely. Fairfield Grace, may God's grace, peace, goodness, and mercy be with you, your family, your business, your studies, and with the lives of your children. Amen.