

100123 "Servant Leadership" Matthew 21:23-32

Today's passage, Matthew 21:23-32, talks about "authority." In order to understand today's passage, we need to know the context of this. Jesus entered Jerusalem with His disciples, and people greeted Him who was on a donkey, saying Hosanna. On the other hand, Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers were concerned because many Jews who had gathered for the holiday would follow Jesus.

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.

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 could say whether or not the animals brought for sacrifice 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. Many people were pilgrims and simply could not go back home and bring other animals with them.

Because Jewish leaders interpreted the deed and teaching of Christ at the temple as challenging their authority, they asked Jesus a question about authority. 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 then.

On the other hand, if they were to say that the baptism of John had no heavenly 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. Jesus said in Matthew 20:28, "just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." 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. In church, there are leadership positions, another name for service. A nomination committee meeting will be held today after this service and we will elect new leaders who will serve our church next year.

When I came to Fairfield Grace UMC two years ago, the coronavirus pandemic was nearing its end, and we still held in person service while being cautious and wearing masks. I remember worshiping with about twenty people at the 10 o'clock service and seven people at the 1 o'clock service. In the United Methodist Church, July 1st is always the beginning of a new appointment. When a new pastor comes to a new church, he or she identifies various ministries of the church. One of them, as you might expect, is the church's financial situation.

Since I started my ministry on July 1, 2021, I looked at the 2020 charge conference materials to see what our church's financial status was in 2020, and found that there was a deficit of \$39,000. Which means, compared to the church's income, the expenses were more than almost \$40,000. It was a bit of a shock. Of course, there was an impact from the coronavirus, but when I analyzed data over the past 10 years, I saw a gradual weakening of church ministry. Of course, this phenomenon is not only experienced by our church but also by many or most churches today. If you look at the life cycle

of many churches, the church is founded, goes through a period of growth, and then enters a period of decline.

Then, there are many cases where churches change from full-time ministry to part-time ministry, and when it becomes difficult to maintain that, they merge with other churches. This is a common reality these days. Except for a few megachurches, churches are aging and there are no young people in church, and no Sunday school. As individual churches become difficult, denominations also become difficult, and this is a phenomenon that is currently happening every day in the United States.

'What should I do as a pastor? 'Why did God call me here?' Previously, I was at a church that had never had any financial difficulties even during the COVID-19 period, but when I came here, the church was in a difficult situation, even though it was located in a good neighborhood. I prayed earnestly and came to a conclusion. UMC pastors can use professional reimbursable expenses. At our church, \$6,500 is allocated per year.

During my first year of ministry here, I did not use a single penny of the \$3,250 that I was entitled to. Since I started my ministry in July, if I calculate half, I get that amount. Simply because the church's financial situation was not good. And the next year, 2022, I didn't use a single penny of the \$6,500. In this way, I saved approximately \$10,000 in church finances. The church is in financial difficulty, so I can't say it's my natural right to enjoy it.

As a pastor, I do not receive compensation when I officiate at a wedding, conduct a funeral, or lead any private worship service. So, in the future, you don't need to feel any pressure when you ask me for such favors. The reason I do this is because the church covers the pastor's living expenses, but I didn't think it was right for me to receive separate money for congratulations and condolences to church members.

Rarely, there are people who force me to do so, but in such cases, I politely decline or make an offering. Some people may think this way. If I don't receive it, what happens to the pastors who receive it? There is no need to

compare like that. That is something I maintain based on my beliefs. However, it is not because I am a cheap person that I act like this.

In fact, there is a Bible verse that made up my mind that way. 1 Corinthians 9:16-18. Apostle Paul was a man who put in great effort to spread the gospel of the Lord Jesus. But he was saying, 'What is my reward? When I preach the gospel, I do so freely, and I do not exhaust the rights given to me by preaching the gospel.' Usually, it is considered a reward to receive something great, but Paul is saying here that it is a reward for himself not to use the rights he is naturally entitled to!

As I read these words, they touched my heart. 'I, too, am lacking, but I wish I could live like this.' As I serve in ministry, I found that there was no grace when I claimed something for myself, but when I gave up my vested interests and served with my own, there was God's grace we all could witness.

The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon once said this. I don't know the exact English expression because I saw this in a Korean book, but the content is as follows. "What humans must do before God is not to have calculated faith, but to have absolute faith. God does the calculations." I don't know about you but I certainly believe this.

Dear beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Thank you for serving faithfully in your positions so far. And I am sincerely grateful to all of you who have served our church with your time, money, and talents. We've had some difficult times, but thanks to our unity with the 1 o'clock service, things are getting better little by little and we are becoming stronger. The challenge remains for us as to how we can better unite and minister for the Lord and for the community. Please pray for this. 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.