

“By What Authority?”

Mark 11:27-33

June 7, 2020

Read Mark 11:27-33

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

Before we get into our text today, one note from the liturgical calendar. Today is Trinity Sunday. This is the day in the church's year – on the liturgical calendar – when we remember and lift up the mystery of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, three persons, reigning from all time and through all time and for all eternity. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Emmanuel, God with us; the Advocate and Helper; all make reference to the mystery of the God who is love. When we come together to sing praises to his name, it is the Triune God whom we worship.

The Westminster Confession says it ever-so-clearly:

In the unity of the Godhead there be three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

I am looking around the sanctuary to see if there are any questions; and seeing none, I am going to assume that you all understand this completely. Watch your mailbox for the take-home quiz we will be distributing... (just kidding).

In a more serious way, the Trinity is a doctrine and an understanding derived from how God has chosen to reveal himself to us. The full nature and character of God is not known to us – reminding us that we are mortal and God is immortal – but to the extent that God has willed to reveal himself, we have reason to marvel at his love for us. In Psalm 8, David mused,

O LORD our Lord, how excellent *is* thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens... When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; ⁴ What is man, that you are mindful of him? and the son of man, that you care for him?

In short: David was in awe. When we think about the Trinity, we are in awe. That is about all I am going to say regarding the Trinity today; other than this observation. If you want to *grow close* to God, dwelling on the mystery and wonder of the Trinity will draw you near. On the other hand, if you only want to know *about* God, the doctrine of the Trinity is more likely to give you a headache.

By What Authority?

When we last talked about things in the gospel of Mark a few weeks ago, Jesus was approaching Jerusalem with the disciples and the crowds. They were amazed because – despite threats posed by the Temple authorities, Israel's political leaders, and the Roman army – Jesus was out front leading the

parade. What normally would follow is the Palm Sunday account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We covered that back at the beginning of April. So today we are going to move into that last week of Jesus' life, looking at his teaching, his confrontations with the authorities, and his Passion.

By the way, do you know why we call it Christ's "Passion?" Lloyd Ogilvie, former pastor of Hollywood Presbyterian and Chaplain of the U.S. Senate wrote,

Acts 1:3 is a fulcrum text: "He [Christ] presented himself alive after his suffering by many infallible proofs." Here, *pathein* [the word for suffering] is the second aorist active (a Greek tense) of *pascho* [the word for passion]. *Pathein* is also used in Acts 17:3 and 26:23 for Christ's suffering, his substitutionary vicarious sacrifice for the sins of the world.¹

Back to the narrative. The city was packed with pilgrims; visitors from around the country who had come for the purpose of celebrating the Passover. Security was tight because the Romans – even though they allow these festivals – were concerned about the potential for violence and insurrection. One only has to look at the news this week to see why the Romans were on high alert when rowdy, motivated, and passionate crowds gather in tight spaces. It only takes one – or a few (like a dozen) – for things to get out of hand in a hurry. News about Jesus had come into the city and the parade in his honor only served to increase the anxious atmosphere within the city. In Mark, the Palm Sunday processional concluded with this note, "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

The next day, Jesus cleansed the Temple. Mark wrote, "When the chief priests and the scribes heard it (Jesus' condemnation of their temple practices), they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching."

That is where we pick up the narrative. The religious authorities were waiting for him the next time Jesus came into the city. The three groups described here – the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders – made up the Sanhedrin, the same group that would later hold the trial for Jesus. They were the ones charged with the responsibility of governing activities in the temple. Jesus' parade on Palm Sunday, leading into the demonstration in the temple where Jesus overturned all the marketers' tables, was not something they approved or would allow.

When Jesus and the disciples came into the city, the religious authorities confronted him. "By what authority," they ask, "are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?" Essentially, this was the, "let me see your license..." conversation. They knew that no one inside the temple establishment gave approval, so it was a trick question: either Jesus would say he did it without authority, which would hurt his cause; or, he would say that he has a God-given right to do it (which, ironically, he does), which will help their case against him for blasphemy.

Jesus was neither impressed nor intimidated by their presence or their demand. He responded by saying, "Tell you what; I will ask you a question – answer me and I will answer you."

¹ Ogilvie, "Preaching With Passion", Theology News and Notes, Winter 2007

1. Answering Jesus requires a decision.

What an opportunity the leaders missed! Jesus gave them an incredible opportunity: answer my question and I will answer yours. The only way to blow this chance was to not answer – and that was exactly what they did. In other words, they were unwilling to take a chance or make a decision. Mark reported their calculation, “If we say this, he’ll say that. If we say that, the people will turn on us.” So, they chose to not answer, “We don’t know.”

Look closely, though. Jesus did not say, “Answer me *rightly* and I will tell you;” he only commanded them, “answer me.” Would they submit to even this basic command from the LORD? No.

Their reason for not answering was not for lack of information, but for lack of conviction. They had two potential responses but refused to commit to either of them. The irony is – and it is a terrible irony – that they were the ones charged with the responsibility of protecting the temple worship from false prophets. Jesus’ question was like a laser precisely pinpointing their nerve: if they said from “heaven”, they could not justify how they rejected John; if they said “from human origin,” they feared how the crowd would react. They did not lack information. They lacked conviction.

Let me repeat that: they did not lack any information. They lacked conviction. Everything they needed to know in order to make an answer was available to them. They all knew whom Jesus was talking about. It was not as if they were in a position to ask honestly, “Who?” They all knew what was at stake.

This same condition exists in many people today – perhaps even among people watching this video at home today. There are so many – even church people – who have never surrendered their lives to Jesus. They are content to sit and evaluate the quality of each Sunday morning’s worship service; good sermon, bad sermon, good music, bad music, etc. There’s a cool detachment that prevents controversy by avoiding conviction. Take note: that cool detachment did not work for the Sadducees with Jesus. Answering Jesus required a decision. It required conviction.

Answering Jesus required conviction then and it does now. Jesus commands, “Answer me.” Your eternal salvation is not dependent upon the quality of the worship services you view or attend. If I preach a dog of a sermon and you get nothing from it, you are not excused from having a personal relationship with Jesus. If the choir/band sings a piece that does not please you or speak to you, it does not excuse you from serving Jesus Christ as the Lord of lords and King of kings.

Jesus had turned the tables on the authorities. He specifically had not answered their question. He did not recognize their authority over him. Instead, he asserted his authority over them by positing the question and demanding an answer. They were required to answer him; he was not required to answer them.

Likewise, we are required to answer him; he is not required to answer us. Jesus asks you and asks me the same question every day, “Who do you say I am?” It is a question of commitment.

Back in my younger years – if any of you can remember before the virus and, in this case, before 9/11 – I used to travel a lot. Many travelers are talkative; I am not. So before the introduction and ubiquity of iPhones, smart phones, iPods, iPads, and air pods, I had a lot of people talk to me on airplanes. I had a number of discussions with people who – upon finding out that I was a minister – told me they “wanted to believe” in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, but they just could not make up their minds. This happened

multiple times; and going cross country on a plane allowed for a lot of open time to have more in depth conversations than you normally might.

“OK,” I would reply, “What is holding you back?”

“I have questions that I just can’t get past.”

“What kinds of questions?”

Normally, these questions had to do with seven-day creationism, virgin birth, or some other thing. “All right,” I would ask, “what else?” I would ask them to list ALL the questions they had. Now, “if those questions were answered to your satisfaction, would you receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

Hemming and hawing. Implicit is, “Ummm, no.” Why? Because it is not information people are lacking, it is conviction.

(Usually, at this point in the conversation on the plane, I could tell that they were looking to see if there were seats open and available for an escape.)

Faith requires a willingness to step out. It requires a willingness to be vulnerable. It requires a willingness to be wrong.

“Well, I do not want to become a Jesus freak or anything like that.” Why not? “Because I would lose all my friends and people will think I am weird.” All right; let’s say you won the lottery, would you *not* share your joy and tell your friends because you were afraid they would look at you differently? No. Would you care if other people thought you were weird? No.

Then why, if you are talking about receiving eternal salvation, your adoption as a child of God, your position as co-heir of the kingdom of heaven with Christ, why would you NOT want to share that with others?

It is not information people are lacking, it is conviction. People do not commit to Jesus because they are afraid. And that same fear often prevents us from seeing the real Jesus.

2. Fear prevents us from seeing the real Jesus.

How do we know that lack of conviction was the root cause of the authorities’ refusal to answer Jesus? Because Mark told us. They were afraid of Jesus’ response if they said John’s authority came from heaven; and they were afraid of the crowd’s response if they said that John was not a prophet. In other words, they were more afraid of the consequence of their answer than they were with what was the truth.

Fear. It is a powerful force. It is not rational. It is not something that we can get rid of simply by trying to think our way through it. Humans fear many things: death, illness, teenagers, people who look different, languages we do not understand. We fear things that make us feel out of control.

During his years as premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by

a shout from a heckler in the audience. "You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?" "Who said that?" roared Khrushchev. An agonizing silence followed as nobody in the room dared move a muscle. Then Khrushchev replied quietly, "Now you know why."

We fear embarrassment, we fear failure, we fear letting down others whose opinions matter to us. We fear losing what we have, we fear having to change. We fear getting older, we are afraid that we will lose the ability to take care of ourselves.

The problem is that we fear those things more than we fear God. Yes, the fear of God is a *good* thing; it is the beginning of wisdom. It is the beginning of wisdom and not the end. Perfect love casts out fear – but that perfect love comes from an intimate knowledge of the loving one.

We tend to have those things backwards. We tend to take God's love for granted and fear those other things. But in doing so, we give those things more power and take our eyes off God. We make idols of them and worship and serve them – in fear – and fall away from worshiping God who is good.

3. Hungering for the truth means watching for the living God.

It is so easy to pick on the religious authorities because they are so neatly cast in the villains' role. Yet the flaw in their character is not so far away from us today. We need to be careful before we start feeling good about ourselves because "well, at least we are not like them."

The religious authorities knew the Scriptures. They knew and could recite chapter and verse about God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery. They knew the prophets. They knew about Ezra and Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the temple. They knew the prophecies regarding the Messiah. So what was the problem?

They did not expect God to act in their midst. They did not expect God to show up. They knew what to look for, but did not recognize him when he actually came.

They wanted God to live up to their expectations. But God does not work that way. In Isaiah 55, God makes it abundantly clear that God does not act to meet our expectations. "Seek the LORD while he may be found," says the prophet. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."

That was a statement of fact; not poetry, hyperbole, or boasting.

Jesus needed no external authority on which to rely to do as he did or act as he acted. He embodied the authority to do those things. When the authorities' asked the question about Jesus' authority, they were not really looking for an answer. They just wanted him to stop. If he said the Law, they could engage him in an argument about the meaning of the law. If he cited any other authority, they would dismiss it because it was necessarily lesser than the law. They thought this was a win-win situation for them.

The one thing they were not prepared to handle was the truth. They mistook their responsibility to exercise authority from God to be the same thing as “owning” that authority. They were “the temple.” They thought that they were the authority.

Jesus’ question to them was an invitation to yield to his authority, to recognize the one who had given them authority. Their refusal showed they were more interested in preserving what they had rather than following where God would lead. They wanted to hold onto the blessing more than yield to the one who blesses.

A few weeks ago, we read the story of the rich man who was more attached to his blessings than to the one who gives the blessings.

The church is more than me. I, your pastor, am not the church. These buildings are not the church. The programs are not the church. Peter’s confession and answer to Jesus’ question, “You are the Christ,” is the rock upon which the church is built. It is the foundation of who we are and what we do. That confession is the recognition of the Lordship of Jesus Christ; an expression of his authority over everything we do and everything we have.

When we say Jesus is Lord, we mean he is lord of everything: including our time, including our talent, including our treasures. In obeying his command to celebrate communion, the Lord’s Supper, we recognize his authority while also remembering how great is his for us. In reflecting on the meaning of the Lord’s Supper, we acknowledge that he has the authority to promise us that we will celebrate it with him face to face one day. It is true. How good is *that* news?

Conclusion

As we close this morning, I want to pose a few questions for all of us to consider and pray about:

1. Do we expect God to show up at First Presbyterian Church, Carson City? Do we expect God to show up at all these days? If so, how would we know? Are we looking?
2. Is the gospel worth sharing? If so, how are you and I sharing the good news with others in our day-to-day lives?
3. Is Jesus Christ the authority in your life or does something else cause you greater fear? If you have never committed yourself to receiving Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, I pray that the Holy Spirit is convicting your heart right now, today, and that you will do so.

From here on out the focus of the gospel of Mark is on Jesus’ passion: his suffering, death, and resurrection.

Jesus confronts each one of us every day, “Answer me: who do you say I am?” It is a question of conviction. It is a question of authority.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.