

“It’s Up to You?”

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 27, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7 ~ Philippians 2:1-13 ~ Matthew 21:23-32

You know the old light bulb joke, right? How many church members does it take to change a light bulb? You know the answer ... four. One to put in the new bulb ... three to stand around and talk about how great the old bulb was. These days that joke is as sad as it used to be funny. I think of things we all know we ought to change and yet for some reason we can’t find the energy or the resolve to change them. The joke reminds me how we remember the old as such a golden space of comfort and security ... that we fret about a future where people are shaking things up.

That is precisely what is happening in the scripture text we read from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus has been shaking up Palestine. He started in the north, in Galilee. Now, it’s Jerusalem ... the very capital of the people’s religion and politics ... that he is twisting into turmoil. Jesus is changing the light bulb ... and he’s making people mad ... because he doesn’t wait for the old bulb to go bad before he rips it out and screws in a new, brighter bulb that lights up and lays bare all the destructive, dark places. Jesus is up to something new!

Jesus’ ministry was deeply troubling to the people who were in religious leadership in his land. He spent his ministry challenging their interpretation of the sacred traditions ... old, ancient, venerable traditions that had given guidance and stability to his people for generations upon generations.

He touched untouchables, like lepers. He socialized with the shameful, like tax collectors and sex workers. He spoke for those who had been denied a voice, like women and children. He broke the law, when its decrees protected the powerful and punished the powerless, like those who were hungry and those who were sick. He

came into the very heart of the people's religion and politics, the Jerusalem Temple, and started wrecking the place that he believed has wrecked the people's relationship with God. And the people responded. At least the people who were weak and broken and lost ... they found in him power and wholeness and direction. They found in his new light warmth and vision. But the chief priests and the elders? They saw what Jesus was doing and how Jesus was representing the inbreaking of God's intentions for God's people and God's world ... and they wanted to stop his act before he shut down theirs.

So, right after he stormed in to the temple, a one-man riot of righteousness, he drove out those who were selling and buying, and knocked over the tables of the money changers and dove sellers. Then, right after he cried out like some sidewalk preacher yelling out of a bull horn ... that they have turned God's house of prayer into a cave of violent, thieving bandits, they fired back, "who the hell do you think you are?" Well, that's what they meant. What they actually said was, "on what authority are you doing this?"

The point of the question was to make him confess that he didn't have any authority. At least not the right authority. Unless he has forged himself a really good fake resume, he's got nothing. He has no college degree. He hasn't been to seminary. He can produce no diploma, certificate, license, or letter of reference. No one has voted him into any office. No one has graduated him from any academy. No one has mentored him in any leadership capacity. He's just some rogue, wandering, wanna-be prophet spouting nonsense to the naive and fooling the foolish.

The way to get people to see that is to ask him to show his credentials because they know he can't produce any. How do they know for sure he won't be able to produce any credentials? Because they are the ones who give out the credentials. They are the organization behind their organized religion. This is their show. No matter how spectacular his work has been, his work has been unauthorized. By them. And everybody knows *they* speak for God.

But the chief priests and the elders also know that Jesus thinks that he speaks for God. They just want him to say it. Out loud. That is the trap behind the question. “If we didn’t authorize you to do the crazy new things you’re doing, Jesus, who did? Say it, Jesus. Say it! Say what you believe. Say God authorized you! Tell everybody loudly and clearly that you think you are working for God.”

That’s the trap behind the question. It’s a perfectly reasonable question, and he has to answer. Otherwise, he looks foolish. He can’t avoid it. He has only two options for an answer and both will make him look like the fool they know he is. He’ll have to say, “Well, I don’t have human authorization because I didn’t go to any human school or have any human instruction.” Or he’ll have to say, “God authorized me.” The first answer makes him look uneducated. The second answer makes him look like a nut. Yeah, right, you talk to God. You! You couldn’t even get admitted to a proper school and you’re telling me God admitted you into God’s confidence. Sure, right. Get outta here!

In our day, that’s embarrassing. In our day, if you say you speak for God, people mock you. In Jesus’ day, if you say you speak for God ... they kill you!

It’s called blasphemy. They just want Jesus to tell the truth. They know he believes he is the Son of God. The crowd knows he believes he is the Son of God. The chief priest just needs him to answer the question and go on the public record so they can make the appropriate public response. They know he is strong enough ... courageous enough ... defiant enough to declare what he believes ... because what he believes is more important to him than his popularity and even his own safety. Everybody already knows the answer. He can’t possibly get the question wrong. His disciples believe he is authorized by God. The people believe he is authorized by God. The chief priests and elders don’t for a minute believe that he is authorized by God, but they know HE believes he is authorized by God. So, just say it. Just say it out loud, Jesus. You want to say it. The people want to hear it. So, just answer the question, truthfully. They literally beg Jesus to tell the truth about himself so they can use that truth to kill him.

But I think he's not ready yet to do that. If he says it, his ministry will be ripped out of his control, and his ministry is not yet finished. There are still things to do, so he really can't answer the question now. Later, in chapter 26, the high priest will ask him this same question, using different words, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?" In other words, have you done all you have done by God's authority as God's son? His answer: "You say so. And I tell you this, you will see the son of man seated on the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven." Since he'd always referred to himself as the son of man, and since the seating on the right hand of power was the seating for the Messiah of God, the question was pretty much answered. And so was the charge in response. In verse 65, the high priest rips his clothes and cries out, "Blasphemy. He has blasphemed." And right then they judged him worthy to be sentenced to death.

That is what is at stake when they ask him, "by whose authority do you do these things?" They want the truthful answer. Because they know they will use the truth to kill him. Jesus and everyone around him know the truthful answer. But Jesus also knows his ministry isn't ready to be terminated, not just yet. So, Jesus makes an unanticipated move. Instead of answering with an answer, he answers with a question, a question that requires a truthful response from them! He ambushes those who had intended to ambush him.

Out of nowhere, he brings up John the Baptist. John, like Jesus, was considered a religious kook by the religious establishment ... baptizing people without a religious license. They hated the guy. But the people, the people loved him! Among the people, John the Baptist was a revered figure. So, Jesus asks, was John commissioned by God ... or was John just one more self-promoting, wanna-be prophet? Well they thought, we can't say God commissioned him because we didn't listen to him, we mocked him. But we also can't say he was the fool we thought he was because this crowd who adored him will go crazy on us.

Jesus handles conversation the way a grand master plays chess. He seems to be several moves ahead of the chief priests and elders. By answering their question with this particular question, he completely hijacks the conversation. The chief priests and elders *were* in control. Now, they're out of control, because they've got this confounding question about John the Baptist sitting out there in front of them. And Jesus has said that he'll answer their question if they answer his. But there is no way they can answer it and come out looking good. And they can't answer the question with a question, because he's already done that. If they try to do that, they'll just end up looking silly.

Then, as if the John the Baptist trap wasn't conversationally lethal enough, Jesus piles on with a parable. A parable directed squarely at them. The first son in the parable certainly represents the chief priests and the elders. They promised to do what God asks them to do, but then don't do it. Because, like the first son, the chief priests and elders care more about themselves than they do their Father's wishes. They promised to follow God's commands, to live up to God's expectations ... but when God revealed God's command for their lives and God's expectation for how they were to shape and care for the lives of God's people, they went their own way ... did what they wanted to do. They refused to hear what God was saying through the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

The second son in the parable would be like those filthy tax collectors and those disgusting sex workers. They have lived all their lives in direct contradiction of God's expectations as written down in the commandments and codes of God's people. The way they lived their lives was a rejection of God's claim upon their lives. And yet, even though they rejected the ways of God publicly and demonstrably, when they heard John the Baptist ... and when they see and hear Jesus ... they believe and they follow.

They change! Because of what they see ... because of this new thing that God is doing. But the chief priests and elders, they don't change. They stay stuck where they

are because they are committed to the tradition, so committed to the tradition, that they can't see the new light that God is breaking into their world.

I wonder today about our resistance to believe things that we are seeing ... the new light that God is shining out for us ... to adjust our behavior as a result of it. I worry about things like creation. We can see the data about the earth warming. We can see the polar ice caps melting. We can see the indications that the sea levels are rising. We can see the ozone warnings. But even after we see the data ... see the devastation caused by super storms that are one clear, demonstrable effect ... we do not change our minds. We do not believe. What will be our answer when someone asks, "What is the new thing the church going to do about this problem?" The church doesn't want to answer, "We don't know."

There is racism in this country, systemic racism in this country. The events of this past summer revealed that in a powerful way. What will be our answer when someone asks, "What is the new thing the church going to do about this old problem? The church doesn't want to answer, "We don't know."

There are people seeking a new way of following and understanding God in and also outside of the institutional church. What will be our answer when someone asks, "What is the new thing the church going to do about this old problem?" The church doesn't want to answer, "We don't know."

What we DO know is that God is even now switching out the light bulbs of human history. God's change is on the move in the blowing of the Holy Spirit moving like a whirlwind in our churches and in our world. We don't want to get caught so religiously worshipping the old that we can't reveal the new. How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb? Maybe just one ... maybe it's just up to you!

Loving God,

Thank you for the feast of life you have set before us by your grace. Give us also the grace and courage to invest our efforts ... to renew the light you continue to give us by sharing in the family we call church and the mission we call love as we follow Jesus, the Christ into life. Amen.