

The Authority of Christ
Matthew 21:12-27

By what authority do you do these things? That's what the chief priests and the elders, the religious leaders of God's people demanded to know when they finally confronted Jesus. After all, He had not only ridden into Jerusalem, accepting the adulation of the crowd which had hailed him as the Son of David, the Messiah for whom they and their ancestors had been waiting for hundreds of years.

He had also been bold enough to charge into the Temple, into their own domain, driving out all those who had been changing money and selling sacrificial animals to those who had come to worship God – merchants who doubtless made a hefty profit from their customers, and just as doubtlessly passed much of it on to the chief priests and elders who had authorized them to carry on their trade in such a prime location. How dare Jesus upset their lucrative schemes! Who did He think He was?

Well, before we consider the way Jesus answered their question, can we be honest? Can we admit that the chief priests and the elders weren't the only religious leaders to have a problem with Jesus' authority? What about the popes of Rome who tried to stamp out Wycliff and Tyndale and Luther and the other Reformers who insisted that all Christians deserved to have copies of the Scriptures in their own languages? What about the modern Protestant bishops and general assemblies and conferences that have embraced the sexual revolution and dismissed all Biblical teaching to the contrary?

But before we Evangelical Presbyterians become too smug, we also need to ask ourselves: what would our own elders do if we were to find that some of our time-honored beliefs or worship practices or mission priorities were somehow not in line with Jesus' teaching? Would we reject the very idea of change, insisting on doing things the way we've always done them? Or would we choose faithfulness to Christ over our traditions?

I'd like to think we would listen to Jesus, no matter what changes He might call us to make. For after all, we know Who Jesus is. Yes, the religious leaders of the day were indignant that the crowd would hail Jesus as the Son of David; but as we profess our faith every Sunday morning we also bow the knee before Him, acknowledging Him as our Lord. Yes, the chief priests and elders rejected the testimony of John the Baptist; but we know that everything John said was true – that Jesus is the mighty One Who baptizes those who trust in Him with the Holy Spirit and fire, that Jesus is the judge of all the earth, gathering His faithful wheat and burning up the unfaithful chaff, that Jesus is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.

In fact, we believe the even more audacious claims that Jesus made about Himself. For in verse 16, when He quoted from Psalm 8, the Psalm we read responsively this morning, Jesus insisted that David was actually talking about Him! In fact, whenever Jesus called Himself the Son of Man, he was claiming to be the One Whom David describes: the One God cares for, the One Who, by His incarnation, was made for a time just a little lower than God, the One Who, by His resurrection and ascension has been crowned with glory and majesty. Yes, Jesus accepted the worship of the crowd because He knew that God the Father would soon make Him the ruler, not just over Jerusalem or even just over the area David ruled between Egypt and the Euphrates River, but over all of God's creation, over all the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea. Oh yes, we know that the Son of Man Who walks on the water and commands the storms to cease has absolute authority over all the world for all time.

And we see Jesus exercising that authority in today's passage, don't we? For as He was going back into Jerusalem on the day after Palm Sunday, he went over to a nearby fig tree, looking for a snack. Finding it to be fruitless, Jesus did something no one else, at least not since the day Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, has ever been able to do: for at a mere word from Jesus, the tree withered.

But Mark's fuller description of the event makes it clear that Jesus' action was as meaningful as it was impressive. For Mark explains that while Jesus spoke to the tree on His way into the Temple, it wasn't until after He came back out of the Temple that His disciples noticed that it had withered. The barren tree is therefore obviously a symbol of the equally barren Temple, ruled as it was by men who were so blind with avarice, pride and fear that they couldn't recognize the One to whom all its rituals pointed. They didn't know their Messiah even when He was standing right in front of them.

So it's no wonder that Jesus exercised His authority over His Father's house in the way He did. Greedy opportunistic merchants had set up shop in the only part of the temple where the Gentiles were allowed to pray, so Jesus drove them out – He didn't want everyone but the Jews to be cut off from their only access to the One True God. And it's no wonder that Jesus refused to answer the elders and the chief priests who dared to question Him – after all, the Son of Man, the Son of David had no obligation to respect or even to acknowledge those who had choked the life out of the place of God's worship, those who had elevated their traditions and their material profit above the people's need for praise and prayer.

So, what about us Evangelical Presbyterians? What about the leaders of our own denomination? Oh, we can have great confidence in their theological orthodoxy. We know they would never do something as selfish and materialistic as to make a profit out of those who come to worship. In fact, our congregation's gifts to our Presbytery and to the General Assembly are completely voluntary.

Moreover, instead of trying to enrich ourselves, our Presbytery is supporting no fewer than four church plants at this time. And our denomination's Engage 2025 project remains committed to planting churches overseas, among Muslim people who have little access to the true Word of God. Oh yes, we Evangelical Presbyterians are truly outwardly focused, devoted to spreading the gospel across the country and around the world.

And I know that the leaders of this congregation have just as big a heart for the work of Christ's kingdom. Year in and year out, about 20 percent of the money that comes into the offering plate goes right back out in benevolences. We support our Presbytery's efforts at church planting and mission. We are helping to train pastors in Northeast Brazil. And it seems like every year we send help down to the coast, to those who have to put the pieces of their lives back together after the next hurricane.

But I wonder if even us Evangelical Presbyterians don't sometimes, however unintentionally, slip into habits that are just as offputting to unbelievers as were those merchants' stalls in the Court of the Gentiles. Take for example our good and necessary attempts to uphold what the Bible says about sexuality and marriage. We have to uphold God's truth, but in the process could we be alienating the victims of the sexual revolution, those people whose culture and experience have left their thoughts and feelings honestly confused about what it means to be a man or a woman? Could the way we express the unchanging need for holiness appear dismissive or prideful or even hateful to them? Could the way we speak the truth be making it hard for unbelievers to come to Jesus?

And however eager we are to support the work of our church planters in other states, how comfortable are we as individuals with sharing the gospel with our own friends and immediate neighbors? After all, we all know folks who aren't actively involved in a worshipping congregation, but how regularly do we invite them to come and worship with us? How often do we share our own faith

journey with them, encouraging those who are suffering in sin to put their trust in the Son of Man, the Son of David, the Lamb of God Who has shed His blood for sinners like us?

And how well are we Presbyterians doing at attracting the younger generation in general? Since they quite literally hold all the world's knowledge in the palms of their hands, they're used to learning on their own terms and at their own pace. They thrive on interaction, on give and take rather than just listening to someone else talk. They prefer visual media, and their musical tastes favor syncopation and percussion. And given the conflicting truth claims all around them, many are rightfully skeptical of anyone who claims to have all the answers. Many have even come to doubt that any universal truth could possibly exist.

So, might we Presbyterians need to rethink some of our cherished traditions and customs in order to reach out to this new generation of unbelievers? Might we need to make some changes in the ways we worship and communicate, in order to bear more fruit for Christ in the world today? And if we don't, can we imagine that He will continue to approve of our praises, in the way that He affirmed the Palm Sunday crowd? Or will Jesus need to come and cleanse our Temple before it withers away?

But perhaps the most urgent, and the most fundamental change we need to make has to do with our prayers. Again, let's be honest. As Psalm 8 makes clear, it's the Lord whose glory is above the heavens. It's the Son of Man Who is crowned with glory and honor. It's Jesus Who has total dominion over everything that moves on the earth or flies through the air or that swims in the sea.

But how many of our problems do we really trust Jesus to solve? On the contrary, aren't we much more inclined to look to our own resources, our own relationships, our own expertise? Whether it concerns our health or our habits, our money or our relationships, don't we independent Americans try to fix it ourselves first? All too often, isn't prayer our last resort? Don't we catch ourselves saying, "Well, all we can do now is pray."

But think of the staggering promise that Jesus makes in verse 21 to all those who pray in faith, to all those who bring our requests to Him in full assurance that nothing is too hard for Him: Jesus says that we can tell even a great mountain to be cast into the sea, and "it shall be done."

And remember the context in which Jesus makes this remark – His confrontation with the religious leaders of the time, those proud, greedy, fearful men who would conspire against Him and bring about His crucifixion by the end of the week. But what eventually happened to those who seemed to be so influential and powerful and wealthy? Some 40 years later, those chief priests and elders, their Temple and all of its ceremonies, their city and all of its magnificent structures, all were completely destroyed by the Romans. The high mountain of their arrogance crumbled into the dust.

Just so, hundreds of years earlier, Jeremiah had made a similar prediction about the collapse of another man-made mountain, the mighty nation of Babylon. In chapter 51 of his prophecy, he recorded this word from the Lord: "Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, Who destroys the whole earth," declares the LORD, "And I will stretch out My hand against you, And roll you down from the crags And I will make you a burnt out mountain. And they will not take from you *even* a stone for a corner Nor a stone for foundations, But you will be desolate forever," declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 51:25-26). And indeed, the mountain of Babylon's power was toppled by the Persians – only a little less than 50 years after Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem. Babylon was never a major world power again, and today it is nothing but a ruin.

No, none of the most powerful governments and the most entrenched institutions have ever been a match for the power of Christ. So, instead of looking to ourselves or to merely human leaders to solve our problems, instead of praying only as a last resort, why not consider prayer our primary

business? After all, can any of the mountains in our lives – sickness or injury, depression or despair, poverty or pain, loneliness or grief or even death itself – can any of them possibly be a match for the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the One Who walked out of His tomb on the third day? So why shouldn't we trust Jesus not only to save us but to show Himself strong on our behalf and on behalf of our loved ones?

So, this week, let us acknowledge and submit to the authority of Christ over every area of our lives. Let us do whatever is necessary to bring others to know Him or to know Him better. Let us bear good fruit for Him: the fruit of worship and mission, evangelism and faith. But above all, let us seek His face in prayer, trusting Him to move even the greatest of mountains that stand in the way of His glory and our good. For nothing is impossible for Him.