

By What Authority?

by Durrell Watkins, M.A., M.Div.

Matthew 21.23-27

Sunshine Cathedral, September 28th, 2008

I'm not allowing myself to be photographed anymore. I saw photos of me from last weekend when we were ordaining Michael Diaz. My cleric's collar made me look like I was wearing a push-up bra for my neck. It was very discouraging.

My weight goes up and down, but I've been dieting again. Yes, I've been on a coconut shrimp and crème brulee diet for weeks now. It's been easy to stick to, but otherwise, no results.

That's not entirely true...I've been dieting for two weeks. You know what I've lost? 14 days.

It's OK. I used to complain to my great aunt Gladys about my appearance (I was a skinny kid with acne), and in her sweet, nurturing way, she'd say, "Oh Honey, you may be no great beauty, but that's why God created personality."

She should talk. People often ask me if I have any electronic images of my Aunt Gladys. The only image I have is from about 30 years ago. I may never have mentioned it, but my great aunt was an entertainer, and so I was able to find a photo from one of her performances [show slide of Ruth Buzzy as "Gladys Ormphby"].

At the end of the 20th chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus and his friends leave Jericho on their way to Jerusalem . Along the way, they encounter two people sitting by the side of the road who call out to Jesus for healing. The story says that they are blind and they are hoping Jesus can restore their sight, which, Matthew says, happens.

Before their sight was restored, however, they had to participate in their own miracle. And so we see them calling out to Jesus, asking for help, demonstrating their willingness to receive it. Even when others tell them to be quiet, they continue to call out, continue doing what they can in order to receive their blessing. The faith that caused them to participate in their own blessing is the faith that finally delivered the blessing to them.

Now, because of what happens in the next chapter, the story may be something of a parable. You see, in chapter 21, there are religious people who are blind to what Jesus has to offer, and only those who seek to be his disciples will have their eyes opened to his ability to show them their own potential.

And so on the road to Jerusalem , the blindness, or we might say "closed mindedness" of religious authorities is foreshadowed. But those who want to understand, will be able to, they will be able "to see," if they participate in their own enlightenment.

Of course, in chapter 21, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem . He wastes no time in going to the Temple and there he finds people being exploited and taken advantage of, and he "cleanses" the Temple , which is a very polite way of saying he had a fit and fell in it. He challenges the Temple authorities, which of course gets him noticed by government officials, and within a week he'll be on trial for his life.

Jesus has been healing people, teaching people, drawing crowds; he's even stormed into the Temple and dared to suggest some reform may be needed. And after that, he drew more crowds! And in response to these activities, religious authorities approach Jesus and ask him in verse 23 today, "By what authority are you doing these things?"

Now let's go back to the Decalogue for a moment. In Exodus 20, verse 4, we hear "You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in

the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow to them nor shall you revere them.” The early Christians took that prohibition seriously, because, of course, the first Christians were Jewish.

The Romans in the early days of the Christian movement had a name for followers of Jesus. The Romans called the early Christians atheists...because they didn't have images for their god. The influence of Roman culture would change that within a couple of hundred years, but the original Christian sensibilities were Jewish and iconoclastic.

God was spirit, to be worshiped in spirit and truth. When Christians were still connected to their Jewish heritage, they did not want any image to limit the divine.

Matthew is writing at the end of the first century in the Roman Empire . The Roman culture loved images. And since Christians didn't have any, many Romans assumed that Christians didn't really have a god. And without a god and an image to represent their god, they had no religious credibility. The Romans considered them people without a real god.

Matthew suggests that not only does the pagan Roman culture question the legitimacy of the Jesus movement, but so do the religious authorities that represent Jesus' own tradition. They don't have images either, but they do have their councils and traditions and hierarchy, and Matthew suggests that those things can become idols too. As can a book, a person, or a name, or any image.

By what authority have you dared to ride into Jerusalem , teach your message, address crowds, and even challenge our theocratic system? Jesus had threatened their idols...those things or traditions or systems that they felt gave them authority. Who did he think he was to act as if he were so empowered? By what authority did he dare question theirs? This is the heart of the conflict between Jesus and his accusers this morning.

In Rabbinic fashion, Jesus responds to their question with one of his own. He says, “Answer my question, and I'll answer yours. John practiced a ritual called baptism...by whose authority did he do it? Was he divinely ordained to do it, or was his authority human in origin?”

Rather than answering whatever they truly believed, the religious leaders started playing politics. They thought if they said John's authority was divine, then they would look stupid for not having signed on to his cause. But, they knew that a lot of people regarded John as a prophet, so if they said his authority was merely human, they would offend his fans. So, they refused to answer Jesus' question. They shrugged their shoulders and said, “We don't know.”

And Jesus says, “you didn't answer my question; I won't answer yours.” Jesus exposes their hypocrisy, their dubious motives, and their lack of spiritual insight. But Matthew's audience, those hearing the story, know that John and Jesus are empowered by Spirit, and so, like those men on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, the ones who are willing to participate in their own spiritual enlightenment get it; those who choose to remain closed minded or hard hearted, do not.

How dare we question the pope?

How dare we question television evangelists?

How dare we question oppressive policies of any government, religion, or organization?

How dare we question an ancient creed?

How dare we question the morality of war?

By what authority do we dare suggest that marriage isn't a heterosexual privilege?

By what authority do we dare suggest that divine love is all-inclusive and leaves no one out?

By what authority do we dare suggest that every person has sacred value?

By what authority do we dare suggest that every person is entitled to the gift of indomitable hope?

By what authority do we dare suggest that regardless of one's religion, politics, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or station in life that every person is made in the divine image and ultimately no one is excluded from God's infinite grace? By what authority?

Our authority comes from the spirit of Justice that guides us, the spirit of Love that motivates us, and the free-thinking example that the spirit-filled Jesus set for us.

It comes from the power to choose our own thoughts and to participate in our own growth; the power that is opening our hearts and minds so that we see all that is available to us as the children of God.

It is the authority of a progressive, positive, practical faith. It is the authority of the Spirit, and it is ours. Like Jesus, we need not apologize for it; we get to simply live in the joyful freedom of the Spirit.

This is the good news. Amen.

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In the name, the nature, and the authority of Jesus Christ...

I affirm joy for my life.

I affirm hope for my life.

I affirm peace for my life.

I affirm divine right action for my life.

God's spirit now blesses me...

Anoints me...

Fills me...

And all is well.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.