

27 September 2020 – Proper 21

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 · Philippians 2:1-13 · Matthew 21:23-32

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By this point in the Gospel, Jesus knows he doesn't have much time left. Just yesterday, he made his (more or less) triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, drove out the money-changers from the temple, insulted them, overturned their tables, and started teaching and healing there instead. Everyone in the city is talking about him: the crowds and the children in the temple crying out "Hosanna to the Son of David!"<sup>1</sup>

A ministry that was fairly local and hidden has suddenly become as public and confrontational as possible. I imagine a rural preacher going up to London, vandalizing the ticket windows in St. Paul's Cathedral, holding forth as if he owns the place; being hailed by most of the city as the second coming of Christ, and implying that he thinks they're right. It's not a perfect analogy, but it might help us imagine how audacious and disruptive Jesus' actions are here.

So when he comes *back* the next day and carries on, the chief priests and elders would probably love to have him hauled off and arrested for blasphemy and/or property damage. But instead, they march up to him and ask, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you that authority?" And he answers: "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"<sup>2</sup>

By answering the chief priests and elders like this, Jesus subverts *their* authority on three different levels. The first is to undermine their authority on their own terms. They want to be the source of answers, so he asks them a question they cannot answer. "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'why then did you not believe him?' But if we say 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."<sup>3</sup>

In part, Jesus is reminding them that – like John – he has the approval of the crowd, and therefore, in the elders' own sphere, he and John in fact have power over them (at least in this moment). But more than that, he forces them to acknowledge that their power really rests on politics and not on truth. They don't believe John is a prophet, because they cannot believe it; it would undermine their political authority, and they don't distinguish between what maintains their power and what is true. Their power determines the truth

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1 Matthew 21:9,15

2 Ibid., 23-25

3 Ibid., 25-26

for them, and that makes them vulnerable to truth that comes from humility rather than power – vulnerable to people, like Jesus and John, who refuse to play the power games, even when that refusal means death.

The second level on which Jesus challenges the elders' authority is to question their assumption that power itself is fixed and reliable. They want to know what his authority is and where it came from: where he fits in the structure of power that governs what is important and determines what is true. He either has legitimate authority in this system or he does not. They're not interested in the truth of what he's saying, only in its authority, because – again – they elide truth and authority together.

To an extent, they're actually right about that. Most truth is unavoidably tangled up with power, politics, and culture. Michel Foucault would say that knowledge is an exercise of power and power is always a function of knowledge;<sup>4</sup> and also that there can be no power relations without resistance: resistance both creates power relations and forces them constantly to adapt.<sup>5</sup>

That dialectic of power and resistance determines what kind of truth is meaningful and even possible to express. Most of the truth we rely on is only true in the context of our culture and situation. We consider several things to be basic human rights that would be completely alien to ancient Israel. Since perhaps the Industrial Revolution, we have taken it for granted that productivity and progress are basic goods – although awareness of climate change has been changing that under our feet. Racism and sexism are bad. Science is trustworthy. Fascism is terrifying. Now these *are* things that are true, really true and important. They are also truths that are produced by the constant flux of power and culture. What is truth? What is power? What is authority? Where is the anchor in all this relativism?

Religion used to answer that for more people, although not necessarily well. This instinctive quest for certainty now leads people in all sorts of directions: fundamentalism, conspiracy theories, dogmatism; and also philosophy, physics, marriage, religious life.

If power implies resistance, and power and resistance together imply relativity and change, the only unchanging and eternal truth is one produced not by power but by

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4 "Michel Foucault", *Social Theory Rewired*, Routledge (<http://routledgesoc.com/profile/michel-foucault>)

5 Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, 167-8

humility and obedience. To quote Foucault: “You see, if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience.”<sup>6</sup>

“And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death –  
even death on a cross.  
Therefore God also highly exalted him...”<sup>7</sup>

This is where Jesus’ authority comes from. God is not an authority that can be resisted; no attempt at resistance can change the power of God – and that means that God’s power is in a completely different category from the authority the chief priests want to know about, or the power relations that Foucault is talking about. It isn’t power at all.

And this is the third way Jesus challenges authority: he demonstrates that power and resistance are not a basic constitutive element of reality. Humility and obedience are the higher law, producing a higher truth. Jesus’ obedience to the Father is not a power-relation but a unity of wills. God refuses to force or coerce us (or Jesus) because that would just be a larger-scale version of the power/resistance dynamic that makes truth relative and unstable. We are not saved by God exercising power *over* us but by the power of God *in* us, which cannot be resisted because it is the principle of existence itself.

The truth that comes from humility is God’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, the joining of the divine and the human in one body sacrificed for us, the forgiveness of sins, the redemption of the fallen, the resurrection of the dead, the primacy of compassion in the fabric of the universe.

We are most Christlike not when we are reasonable but when we are compassionate, even to the point of death. This has been countercultural at several points in history and it’s strikingly so today, when logical positivism still has a substantial hold over our cultural definition of truth. And the biggest paradox is that compassion, the eternal and unchanging truth, is always situational, always human and specific, reinterpreted and reincarnated in each new encounter.

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6 Ibid., 167

7 Philippians 2:7-9

Every other authority is temporary. As Ezekiel says, “get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit”; “turn, then, and live.”<sup>8</sup> And Paul, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”<sup>9</sup> Things always need to be worked out anew with God, approached with humility and questions and a new spirit. We can never rest on the authority of the past or on human structures of power. The authority of the righteous is undermined by their iniquity; the authority that would condemn the wicked is superseded by righteousness. The elders’ authority is undermined by John’s message and the regard of the crowd. There is always a new authority in Christ, which is compassion, humility, and the constant turn toward righteousness. Salvation comes through change; from questioning authority from a position of humility; from turning again and again, in every age and every situation, from wickedness to righteousness, from death to life.

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8 Ezekiel 18:31-32

9 Philippians 2:12-13