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**Matthew 21:23-32**

“Who do you think you are?”

The question that the chief priests and elders ask Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” didn’t come out of the blue. It’s part of the intense, growing controversy between Jesus and the temple leaders.

Just before this morning’s passage, Jesus has entered Jerusalem to shouts of “Son of David.” Jesus does come from the line of David, but this title is more than a claim of genealogy. It is a messianic claim. That is certainly a threat to those who think they are in charge.

Then Jesus goes into the temple and drives out the merchants, turning over their tables and calling the temple a “den of robbers.” Talk about threatening! Jesus is challenging the leadership here that allowed the temple to denigrate into a robber’s den.

So, when he returns to the temple the next morning, it’s little wonder that the chief priests and elders, the temple leaders, want to know, “Who does he think he is?” They are the authorities, after all, the ones in charge. Where does Jesus get his authority to challenge them?

But Jesus doesn’t answer them. Instead, he poses a question back to them that they can’t safely answer. He asks, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” They can’t say heaven since they didn’t believe John and they can’t say from humans because they are afraid of the crowd. Jesus essentially exposes the insincerity of their question. They didn’t really want to know where his authority came from. They wanted to catch him in public blasphemy and challenge of their rightful authority.

In identifying himself with John the Baptist, Jesus further upends things. He is identifying with a marginal character straight out of Israel's prophetic history, who met an untimely death for challenging one of Israel's actual authorities – Herod. Jesus is making it clear that he doesn't aspire to traditional forms of power. His authority drives him to the margins, not to the centers of earthly power, whether religious or political. Jesus is bold. He isn't content to confine his message to the dessert where John wandered. He takes it to the holy city, even to the temple itself where he knows it won't be well-received by those in traditional roles of power.

Jesus is telling the temple priests and telling us who hear these words this morning that the children of God aren't necessarily the ones who are born into the right families and who run in the right circles. The children of God are those who are willing to repent – to turn toward God. Righteousness isn't in confessing the right things. It is in doing them. Doing the will of the Father. This is the authority that centers Jesus and it is the authority that Jesus invites us to center ourselves in.

The message for both Jesus and John is one of repentance – turning away from evil and returning to God. We Episcopalians aren't too comfortable with the word repent, let alone the word evil. It brings to mind revivals and emotional altar calls. We like to keep things a little more buttoned up. But perhaps it's time for us to reclaim Jesus's call to repentance.

What do you think of when you hear the word repent? Does it make you squirm? Do you feel badly? Like you can never measure up? Where did we get that idea of repentance? Maybe it is from religious leadership like the leadership Jesus is challenging in today's parable. They are concerned with certainty, with who's in and who's out. But Jesus refuses their certain path to righteousness and instead he tells them it's the ones who are willing to be changed, transformed, the ones who are willing to change their minds are the ones who are doing the will of the Father.

Repentance isn't a momentary confession of sorrow, it's not an emotional altar call or a matter of saying the right things. Repentance is deeper and wider than that. It is a willingness to deepen our union with God and with one another and to dare to see the world as it might be, free from hatred and injustice and violence. To repent means to ask ourselves, in the presence of God, where do I need to be transformed? What is blocking me from allowing myself to be changed? What do I need to let go of so that I may be free to move forward in the hope of God's promises?

Because in the end, this repentance that Jesus calls us to is about hope, the hope of the Reign of God. How can each of us remove the obstacles to the work of bringing God's reign to earth as it is in heaven?

This is big work, to allow ourselves to be transformed and to work for the transformation of our world. But Jesus was bold and he calls us to be bold, too. To boldly turn away from evil and repent. This evil isn't necessarily something dramatic outside of us. For some of us, it might be an inability to feel worthy of God's love. Or maybe we need to turn away from holding others to such high expectations that we make it impossible to love them. Is there some addiction in your life that has a hold on you, that keeps you chained to it instead of free to live each moment? Maybe some days it's the evil of harsh judgement that blocks you from seeing the face of Christ in someone.

This evil that Jesus calls us to repent from may be evil done on our behalf, as our prayer books says. Repentance can include allowing us to see the injustice built into our collective way of life, hard as it is to face. Or maybe it is facing the lure of overconsumption that robs others of having their basic needs met and threatens to destroy the delicate beauty of God's creation. This is big, bold work. Jesus isn't concerned with pious words or actions. He is concerned with our willingness to be transformed that we may do the work of the Father.

Where do we get the authority to do this work? Our authority comes from the God who welcomes sinners and prostitutes and us. Our authority comes from immersing ourselves deeply in the God who longs to transform us into Resurrection people.

So the next time that question rings in our head or someone asks, “Who do you think you are?” May we know the answer. May we stand firm in the knowledge that we are God’s own, called to be co-creators of the new creation. This week, I pray that we may each take time to ask ourselves where we need the transforming power of God’s love and that we may listen closely to God’s reply. Who do you think you are? God’s beloved. Name it. Claim it. And move forward in the transforming power of God’s love.