

By Who's Authority?

Collect (Proper 21): O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Exodus 17:1-7	Give us water to drink!
Psalms 78:1-4, 12-16	I will declare the mysteries of ancient times
Philippians 2:1-13	(he) emptied himself
Matthew 21:21-32	By what authority are you doing these things?

Give ear O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth,
for I will proclaim the Name of the Lord, and ascribe greatness to our God.

“What do you think,” asked Jesus. “A man had two sons ...”

There is an old saying: **A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.**

We have a good example of that in the gospel today. A man has two sons. He asks one kid to go work in the vineyard. He says no, but later does what he was asked to do. The other child was also asked to go work in the vineyard. He said, “Sure pops. No problem.” But then he went and did something else and never got around to doing what he said he would do.

Which of the two was obedient? Which of the two was faithful? Which of the two was a model for what it means to be a child of God, a child of the covenant?

Now, if you're like me (and let's pray you're not), you know the right answer. The Pharisees and rulers of the temple knew the answer. *"The one who did as they were told."*

But **is** that the right answer?

I look at both these kids and neither one is much to brag about. Neither one honors their father, really, do they? One says no; the other "does" no. Even though one changes their mind, I still find my face turning red, my stomach churning, and my brain wondering if maybe we shouldn't bring back the Rack and the Office of the Inquisitors!

But that's what Jesus does. He gives us a short story that tells us something about God and about God's children, and we make a mistake if we stop where the temple bosses stopped.

"Who is the honorable child?" he asks. And the answer is: neither one. And that's the point.

Our temptation is to immediately assume we are the obedient child. As soon as we do that, of course, we forget the first half of that child's response to their father's request. "No. No I won't. No, you can't make me. No, I don't want to." The Brat!

Our temptation is to gloss over reality. Our temptation is to believe that we are the hero in our own story – and we are – but we are also the villain.

I always strive never to use my own children as examples in sermons, but since this story goes back 30+ years, I think the statute of limitations has run its course, and it's probably not too different from your own experiences as parents or as children.

Our son was about 10 or 12 and was responsible for closing the garage door at the end of the day. We had a detached garage. One winter's night I looked out as our son went to bed and noticed the garage door was still open. I was tired of reminding him each night to go close it, so having reached the end of my tether I waited until he was all snuggled up under his nice warm blankets and eyes closed all angel-like. As soon as I was sure he was as warm and comfortable as was humanly possible I flipped on his bedroom light and said in my best imitation of a top-sergeant's voice, "David, you forgot to close the garage door again. Get out there and close it NOW!"

I didn't let him put on a robe or coat, even though it was probably 20 degrees (give or take). I made him go do his job, and when he was done I said, "Thank you."

And the world went back to turning on her axis once again.

Was our son a disobedient child? Of course not. He was a ten year old airhead. He wasn't bad or evil. He was simply a little ADHD, and as best I can tell, he never forgot to close the garage door after that.

"The kingdom of heaven is like that," says Jesus. We do what we shouldn't, or we fail to do what we should, or we give things a half-hearted effort – close enough for government work, my dad would say – and we move on.

Our temptation today is to look at this story and identify with the first child, the one who "repents" (to use that wonderful church word), but in reality, sometimes we do, and sometimes we don't, and either way, we are still children of the father, aren't we?

The parables of Jesus only have power if we put ourselves into them, not as one character or the other, but as each character in the story. The stories have power because there is no one "right answer."

It's not like taking a Math Quiz or a History Test where there is only one right answer.

Jesus is being tested, of course. "By what authority are you doing this?" they ask.

These are the chief priests and elders of the temple. They have their place – their power – because they were born into it. That was their world and their world-view. For someone who was just a village handyman, the big-wigs want to know: "What gives you the right to come in here, interrupt the Temple Commerce and teach?"

Jesus laughs, of course, and asks them: "Let me ask you first: By what authority did John the Baptizer baptize?"

The irony, of course, is that the "authorities" wouldn't answer their own question: "by what authority ...?"

What's even more ironic is that Jesus then answers the question with the parable we heard this morning, the Parable of the Two Sons – but it's really the Parable of the Father's Authority. (isn't it?)

We get caught up with the two kids, but really, it's the Father – the Head of the Household – we should be looking at.

"Go work in my vineyard," he says.

That's our authority as children of God. It's such a short exchange we miss it, but that's the crux of the matter. "Go work in my vineyard."

That's what John the Baptizer was doing as he baptized and challenged folks to clean up their lives and act like children of a holy God.

That's what Jesus was doing when he went into the temple and pitched a fit: "People should be coming to pray," he said, "but you've turned this into a house of ill repute."

"The business of the temple is prayer," he says, "but you've turned it into a den of thieves. You've gone from worshiping God to worshiping Gold."

Jesus says, "There are really only two kinds of people: those who rebel, then change their lives and get back on track – and those who put on a happy face and do whatever the heck they want to, and leave the track behind."

Nothing has changed. The mission of the church hasn't changed. We are children of God, and God's vineyard needs tending. There are fences to mend, vines to trim, grapes to harvest, seeds to plant, irrigation hoses to move around, weeds to pull. The list goes on and on.

In the life of the church, there's committees and commissions, there's altar guild and music, worship leaders and lectors, eucharistic visitors, ushers, and greeters, and all the work we have to do to keep our church safe for everyone who comes through those doors, who seek sanctuary or a cup of cold water, hot coffee, or a friendly smile.

By what authority do we do these things and more?

By the authority of the One who says, "Go work in my vineyard today." Why? Because the vineyard needs tending, and that's why God has put us here.

It all goes back to the first couple of chapters of Genesis. When God had finished all their work, and before they went down for their afternoon nap, they said to the first couple: "Take care of my creation; take care of one another."

That's the work we've been given. It's really as simple as that. The only thing we have left to decide is:

Will I be one who says NO, but does what they're supposed to do eventually (with enough nagging),
or will I be one who says yes, but then ignores their task-du-jour?

This is the Lord's vineyard. Each of us and all of us together have work to do. No matter how well or how poorly we may do what we've been called to do, we are still children of God, loved by God, and called by God to take care of the vineyard and to take care of one another.

At the end of the day, that's our mission, that's our garage door. It is God who sends us out, and that's all the authority we need to go and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Amen.

Sermon delivered by the Rev. Keith Axberg to St. Paul's (Mount Vernon, WA) 09/27/2026

Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “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?” And they argued with one another, “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.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”