

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

**Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 27, 2020**

Psalm 25:1–10

1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

2 O my God, in you I trust;
let me not be put to shame;
let not my enemies exult over me.

3 Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame;
they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

5 Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all the day long.

6 Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

7 Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!

8 Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

9 He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

Old Testament Reading: Ezekiel 18:1–4; Ezekiel 18:25–32

18 The word of the LORD came to me: 2 “What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the

children's teeth are set on edge'? 3 As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. 4 Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.

Ezekiel 18:25–32

25 "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? 26 When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. 27 Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. 28 Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 29 Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?

30 "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. 31 Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live."

EPISTLE: Philippians 2:1–4; Philippians 2:5–13; Philippians 2:14–18

Christ's Example of Humility

2 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:5–13

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness

of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Lights in the World

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Philippians 2:14–18

14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. 17 Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. 18 Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

THE GOSPEL Matthew 21:23–27; Matthew 21:28–32

The Authority of Jesus Challenged

23 And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” **24** Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. **25** The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ **26** But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a

prophet.” 27 So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

Matthew 21:28–32

The Parable of the Two Sons

28 “What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ 29 And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. 30 And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. 32 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 when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

Sermon 37 – Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

“By What Write”

Matthew 21:23-27

Dear friends,

The question of rights and authority is a common and popular one these days. It's very easy to roll your eyes at a large portion of it, because it seems a broadcast of naked self-interest, but there's usually something more going on than simply that. Jesus demonstrates this quite adeptly. Where you start is often the indicator as to where you end up. If your source is rotten, your destination will be rotten too. The heart gives birth to the hands, and while the hands can train the heart, that road is a little more rocky though often worth taking.

Why am I starting with this? Jesus talks in this vein, and both how He does it, and what He says, are worth noting. As you will see, Jesus is asked this question very plainly and very simply. Who gave you the right to teach in our temple? By what authority do you do these things? This is God, of course, we know that, but it becomes incredibly obvious when you read the Gospels that the chief priests and elders either didn't, or they knew it all too well and hated Jesus for it. It's

hard to tell sometimes. Matthew certainly gives the distinct impression, when you read the whole thing, that the Pharisees and teachers of the law and all the rest knew exactly who Jesus was, and that only strengthened their antagonism toward Him. Jesus may have been the Messiah, but Jesus wasn't their Messiah. They couldn't control Him, they couldn't get around Him either, He didn't fit into their plans. So they condemn, reject, and eventually murder Him.

Jesus doesn't make great strides to help them with this, by the way. Jesus meets many people in the middle, so to speak, but He doesn't do much to accommodate Himself to the Pharisees and such. This is quite clear in our Gospel lesson, and I want to explore the reasons why and perhaps what we can learn from this, and how it contributes, if it contributes at all, to this discussion on rights. Do remember that this is the tail end of the Gospel. Jesus is now in the midst of actively resisting the influence of these men on the minds of His hearers. He is here to be crucified, and He is going to go down fighting, and what that means for Jesus is He is going to go down preaching and teaching. He isn't here to make these people angry, but He isn't going to stop, and He really really isn't going to stop because He knows the cross is coming.

“23 And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” I want to remind you how sensible this question is from a human perspective. Comparing the temple to our church is disingenuous, because the temple was more like a mall. It had a variety of places to go, people to hear, things to do. It was all centered around the Jewish faith, don't get me wrong, I doubt they had a Starbucks in there, but it was much more of a circus than the focused worship we have in here. So you have not just one preacher to one congregation, but many, with others over there doing some kinda Bible study too. It is not crazy for the folks in charge of the place to ask a random guy what He's doing teaching in their space. It just isn't. What right do you have to be here is a fair question.

But this is also Jesus. Putting to one side the fact that He is the Son of God, this is a celebrity. He isn't some fellow pulled off a street corner. He's been a public figure in this very structure on and off for years. Why are they doing this now? They've let Him go throughout the land preaching and teaching, He's been in the temple before, and now they're confronting Him with this question of authority.

Species resistance is a big theme in the book of Matthew. The Jews epitomize all of us, they emblemize our absolute worst qualities in this book. The Gentiles are the heroes in Matthew, they're the ones who will at least bother to have a reaction to Jesus. Matthew does this on purpose, Matthew himself was very much a Jew and very critical of the way His religion and people received Jesus, as He should be. But Jesus extends this out beyond anything of race or creed, Jesus says this is us. This is people. Bland disinterest in salvation or truth. Disregard for the neighbor. Outright suspicion and hostility toward God. Under sin, that is our human condition, and throughout all his book Matthew highlights this perfectly.

Jesus responds, and His response is a bit alarming. He doesn't answer, He counters, like a fencing match. **“24 Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?”** It ceases to become the authorities stepping in and becomes a debate. Jesus' question here is carefully phrased and deeply insightful. He is not seeking to humiliate them for the sake of it. While it's easy to smile at Jesus when He gets sarcastic or witty, He's not doing this to take the big fancy shi shi types down a peg. To me, this question is a litmus test for sure, but it is honestly phrased to discover what they think of authority. The fact that He chooses John is great, because John wasn't just widely recognized, John also fell outside the typical structure of the authorities. John was also critical of the authorities.

I'll get to the point. Jesus is asking them this question to see if they're willing to admit that sin. Sin gets wrapped up in what we create, the structures that we put in place. The religious structure of the Jewish people has been wrapped with that sin. God created it, and humans corrupted it. They used it for their own purposes. Jesus is inviting them to admit that fallibility. He's nailing them down to a choice. You admit you were wrong about John, and we can keep talking. You stick to it, we can keep talking. Notice that Jesus isn't looking for the right answer, He's looking for an honest answer. Jesus will keep talking to them no matter if they're repentant or not. He'll tell them straight up what they want to know if they have the courage to come out and say that John's baptism was a made-up human thing. But they don't. They're afraid of the crowds. They're afraid of losing their authority

“And they discussed it among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ 26 But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” 27 So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” So Jesus will not answer either. They won't engage with Him, they won't risk, they won't commit. More to the point, they won't be honest. They won't be honest about their sin or their unbelief. Jesus will engage with unbelievers, He does it all the time. He gets after them, He is the Good Shepherd seeking His lost sheep. He will not engage with those that try to lie their way around Him. He will not engage with those that come blandly.

By what right does Jesus do these things? We know. Jesus is the Son of God, He has every right. That's not the question. What I want you to think about is their reaction to this and the question Jesus is asked. The teachers of the Law are concerned about authority, Jesus is concerned about truth, and where those two things meet you have our lesson for today. From where does truth come? Does it come from you, or from God? So much of our truth comes from what God has given us, eyes, ears. Our brains. So much of the rest has to come from God, or else it means nothing. Where do you think it comes from? Who is doing all of this? These are questions of every time.

So much of authority is being questioned, it is being in some cases outright overthrown. So much of what we know has shifted, and it doesn't take a great deal of time to find dirt on just about anybody. Some of it is tragic, some of it is understandable, mostly we have no idea how it will turn out. But Jesus teaches us here, He reminds us here, that we, His children, start in the right place. The Pharisees didn't, they wouldn't admit they were wrong and they wouldn't stick to their condemnation of Him either, they tried to have it both ways. Self-interest and protecting their power hollowed them out, made mockery of their authority. We don't. We have the authority of the only true Word of God, and that is what we rest on. While we are subject to other authorities in this life and they have their human idiocies and temper tantrums, they do not change that we are God's children and in His care. Humans may simply be fighting over who gets to be tyrant, just like kids fight over who gets to be king of the hill. Let them. Let us. God fights over us, and our salvation, through Jesus He engages us with His word to bring that word to us.

Make sure your source, dear Christians, is that truth. Much of what is being discussed doesn't have a lot to do with that at times, it deals with arguable human definitions of right and wrong. These things are worth talking about, probably, but we have something more sure and more certain: That God is for us, and so who can be against us?

Amen.