

One Spring day, Jesus strode into the Jerusalem Temple, and he was distraught by what he saw. The place created to house the presence of God had become a place intent on profiting from God's presence. Next thing you know, Jesus is turning over tables, and running off the profiteers.

The next day, Jesus returns to the Temple, and this is the setting of our text. Today's lection is a conversation between the Temple establishment and Jesus.

I read you the text, so I'll spare you the detailed recap. I think it all boils down to this: the Temple leaders are asking Jesus a pointed question: "By what authority do you think your voice matters?"

When you think about it, this Jesus is pretty audacious. Here's this no-account, country rabbi from the Galilee, who lacks formal training, and a bona fide birth, and credentials from the in-crowd. And he has the nerve to come to the very center of Jewish culture, and proclaim his ideas of righteousness, and justice, and God-centeredness? He has the nerve to believe he's got a voice that matters?!? Have. You. EVER?!?

Gosh, that's like creating a hashtag on Facebook. How dare marginalized voices disrupt privilege?!? That's like gathering and lamenting in Louisville to bring attention to a justice system that will not admit its hypocrisy. That's like demanding the magistrate count the vote you are entitled to. That's like claiming your humanity in a world where the powerful benefit from your silence, and your lack of self-worth. Has he no shame?!? Have. You. EVER?!?

The Temple leaders had gotten used to having enough-er. Note the emphasis on the "er." They kept the peace for King Herod. They held their tongues. They looked the other way. They gave in a little, in order that they might line their pockets with a little more. After all, if you are the authority, it matters more what you say than what you do. You put on your long robe. You sit at your place of honor. You speak in a high pulpit. And if you say the earth is flat, then by God, the earth is flat.

But what happens when there's a movement? What happens when God's inertia gets going? What happens when a haggard prophet, with long hair, and a scratchy

robe preaches a fiery repentance? What happens, when the people become eager to turn away from the darkness and blah, and turn toward light and love? What happens when the One John says will follow him baptizes with God's spirit? What happens when people realize that's God's realm is bursting into the present?

I think what happens is that God's people claim God's authority, and the Word of God becomes the World of God. That is, people do more than talk, they also act. Rather than bind up God's truth, draw out its parameters and credentials, they allow themselves to be bound up in God's truth, encircled by its limitless possibilities. God's truth, not Caesar's, becomes their source of authority. And they are free to be empowered by and act upon that authority.

Jesus doesn't directly answer the pointed question of the Temple elders, but he doesn't have to: It's clear his power, his authority, his audacity is rooted in God.

The Temple was always intended to be a circle of God's love. But somehow, the Temple elite got it wrong. They made these concentric circles around the Holy of Holies. So the closer one was to the center, the closer they were to God. And only a select few could enter the center-most chamber. And even though it was unearned, these elite clung to their sense of entitlement and authority.

What Jesus understood, and seeks for each of us to understand also, is that God's love does not move inward, it moves outward. It's not that all are drawn to Jerusalem, with all of its trappings, and all of its artificial authority, but rather, that God grows out from Jerusalem, gathering the masses as a pebble's splash ripples through a pond. And the inertia of God's love, the constant momentum of God's grace and God's truth, these are the things that breed authority.

As I read this morning's passage, I desperately want to be one of the good guys. I want to stand behind Jesus, pointing at those long-robed elites, wondering how many perimeters and parameters they have established, and by whose authority they've done it.

But if I am honest, I hear Jesus asking me: "Are you content to speak God's word, but not work for God's world? And how many perimeters and parameters do you

create for yourself to distinguish God's love? Are you acting on God's authority, or justifying false authority for yourself?"

The Temple establishment was flummoxed by Jesus, because they couldn't concede that either he or John mattered. To call them prophets was to concede God's call on their lives, to afford them value, to acknowledge their divine authority. To call them ordinary men was to risk rioting crowds. Either way, they were scared of losing their power and their privilege, either by honor, or by virtue, or by force.

Well here I stand. A person of every possible privilege. And a person who definitely claims more authority than I deserve.

I live, we live, in a world where for one person to matter more, someone else has to matter less. Caesar tells us that our vote, our status, our child's education, our sense of calling and fulfilment, our income, the size of our home...all of these things have to be more than our neighbors, or else somehow, someway, we're less. Don't believe me? Try tweeting #BlackLivesMatter and see how long it takes for someone to tell you who else matters just as much, if not more. Seriously, a place as expansive and imaginative as the Internet is still bound up in and beholden to Caesar's tired parameters.

And we have the audacity, too often, to listen to Caesar's silly and fleeting falsehoods, rather than to faith God's constant truth. So we draw out our circles, we create our courtyards of status and privilege, we put more effort in the infrastructure of our faith than in its application. We seek to be right, and to be safe, and to be assured rather than to be righteous, and to be vulnerable, and to be humble, and to be generous. We tell our Daddy, "Sure, I'll work the vineyard. And then we play hooky, convinced he'll never even notice the work wasn't done."

Too often we claim, and we generate, and we justify our authority, not in God, but in the privileges Caesar affords us. And such false authority blinds us not only from seeing our own value as God's beloved, but the value of our neighbors as God's beloved, too.

What sets Jesus apart, what makes Jesus a worthy example to follow, why Jesus illumines the divine for each of us, is that Jesus had the unique ability to both identify AND claim his God-given authority. Having claimed this authority, Jesus used it not to secure the finite trappings of wealth, power, and privilege in Caesar's world, but instead to find freedom in the infinite possibilities of love, truth, justice, and friendship in God's world. Jesus used and still uses his authority to let others share in God's abundance, not to hoard it for himself.

It's time, Sardis Baptist Church, for us to faith that we are enough, that our neighbors are enough, and all that all of us, together, are enough in God. In other words, God has credentialed us, given us authority. That means we don't have to live into what Caesar thinks we should be, but rather we get to live into what God intends for us to be: Ourselves; beautiful, wonderful, talented, gifted, diverse, credentialed, weird, benevolent, generous, silly, quirky, unpredictable, creative, energetic, beloved children of God. Us!!!

Here's the good news of today's passage, Sardis Baptist Church: you, me, everybody, we are enough in God. God has authorized and credentialed us. This authority is in abundance; it's not gonna run out if you use a bunch, and your neighbors do, too. And this authority is freeing – we get to be God's people!!! And this authority is accessible – there's no deadline to claim it, no fine print to wade through.

Friends, God has authorized us. We are enough. We are enough. We are enough!!! May God give us the strength to use God's authority to work the vineyards, to reclaim the Temple, to bring about a just and equitable world, to be a people of love! May God give us the strength to make God's word God's world.

May it be so. And may it be soon!

Amen.