

October 1, 2017
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Most Gracious Authority”

Matthew 21:23-27

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

The chief priests and elders pose this question to the Son of God after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and His subsequent angry clearing of the temple of the money-changers and hawkers. But Jesus turns the tables on them, showing everyone that these false teachers don't even have the authority to truthfully answer a simple question about the prophet John the Baptist.

In a couple days they will attempt to usurp God's authority again by making themselves judge and jury over God's Christ and enlisting Pontius Pilate as executioner. Jesus gloriously turns the tables again, rising from the dead in victory Easter morning. Yet even then, most of the Jews and Jewish leaders reject Jesus' gift, stubbornly asserting themselves, their race or their law as the saving authority in their lives.

Today we still struggle with this, but it's the simplest of concepts to understand.

Bridgette and I have a 16-year-old wiener dog named Schatzi. If we have to leave the house for a while, I'll go over to the chair in the living room where she spends her time sleeping on a warm heating pad, scoop her up and bring her out and set her down in the front yard to do her business before we go. Invariably, she turns her disgruntled eyes toward me with a look that says, *“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”*

It's an easy answer. “I'm your master. I bought you. I feed you. I provide your home and all that you need. I take you to the vet, purchase medication for your ailments and give them to you. You're a frail and feeble creature and without my provision and governance in your life, you'd be dead. So, get with the program, do your business and let's get moving.”

Likewise, we have a concept of what we want our life to be like and what we want to do, but then God comes along and gets in the way. It may be His perfect Law written on our hearts and spelled out in His Holy Word that stands in the way of a sinful thought, word or action. Or it may be some circumstance of life preventing us from reaching some goal because God has other plans. It may just be the inevitable brokenness of some relationship in life, or the decay and decline of our very body. Whatever, life goes in a direction we don't like and we grumble at God, *“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”*

It's an easy answer. He is God. He is the God who created you, gave you your very unique being. He is the God who has provided you not only with life, but with every earthly blessing that supports your life. Every good thing you've ever had has been from God. He is what gives your life purpose because you have been created for His purposes, whatever they may be. Thus, He has complete authority, always. It's a no-brainer.

But we're an awful lot like the chief priests and elders. Despite the clarity of God's sovereign power over us and all creation, we want to carve out authority over God. And while we can dress it up in all sorts of philosophies and theological window dressing, the only way we really can gain authority over God is to kill Him. We try to do just that every time we set ourselves or something else of the world up as a false god to rule us in the manner we prefer. We try to kill God and set some other idol in His place.

But guess what? Thankfully, God won't stay dead to us either. Jesus did rise from the dead that first Easter Sunday, and He then commissioned His disciples with a task; *“All authority*

in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

By Christ’s divine authority His church has proclaimed the Gospel. By Christ’s divine authority the Holy Spirit works through this proclamation to call sinners in faith to repentance for all their foolish attempts to kill their God. By Christ’s divine authority, our rebellions, though many, are all forgiven and we are declared by God to be “not guilty”, justified by His grace.

Ironically, this is what should really cause us to question God! I mean, if Schatzi continually rebelled, snapped at me and did her business all over the house, she’d be buried in a hole in the woods out back of the house! But God continually calls us back to Himself in love and forgives us our sins! In that we should often look to Him and ask, “*By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?*”

It’s an easy answer—the authority of His own holy and precious blood shed on the cross. Christ has authority over not only us, but over our sins. He owns those sins because He took them upon Himself, paid their price in His own body and soul and died under the Father’s wrath in our place. In Him those sins stand fully damned into death and removed from us as far as the east is from the west.

And because Jesus paid the price we stand purchased back from Satan, sin and death forever! Jesus has the authority to stand before the Father as our advocate, rendering every one of Satan’s accusations against us to nothing—paid in full.

And Jesus has the authority distribute this gift in the way He chooses, and thankfully He chooses to give it to you in simple ways—His Gospel Word and blessed Sacraments of water, bread and wine.

Our main challenge I guess is to not be like the chief priests and elders. The Son of God stands before us in authority. We can recognize His authority, receive His Lordship and all the blessings it brings, or we can insist on being the authority over ourselves and depend on our own reason and righteousness to save us when the Day comes.

I wish the latter weren’t so tempting. They didn’t fear Jesus but they did fear the crowds. We’re tempted to not fear God yet we do fear the world. But they didn’t know Jesus as you do. You know the price He has paid to make you His own, and you know that He did it out of love. His love for you is ultimately the authority by which He does this wonderful forgiveness to you.

Schatzi knows I’m the master, but only because I’m bigger than her and have opposable thumbs and can swat her or squirt her in the face with a water sprayer if she gets out of line. If she could take the reigns of authority, she’d do it in a heartbeat.

It’s not that way with God. It’s not just that He is the Creator so far beyond us in power and glory, although really, that should be enough. If you really want to beat the temptation to be the authority over yourself, turn to the love of God in Christ Jesus. Love is what His authority ultimately does to you forever. It’s hard to rebel against love. So see Him for the love that He is, and gladly receive His gracious authority to save you.

Amen.