

Sermon: Fear and Trembling for First Reactions

Year A, Proper 21

[Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25: 1-9; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32](#)

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Let's say you're a junior priest at the Temple. Not a rookie, but nowhere near the top. It's the week of Passover, you're heading up to the biggest day of the year. You're not senior enough to be in on the high level planning, but you know it's been going for months. The chief priests have been meeting with the civic authorities with the godforsaken Romans. Those Romans threatened to cancel the whole festival. It took some pretty slick diplomacy to keep that from happening. People come from all over the Empire.

There's been all this work to make sure that the important people and big donors felt special. You could fill the courtyards of the Temple ten times over with just the VIPs, but you need to accommodate regular people too. They don't know what to do or where to go or how to pray and they are always in the way. And you have to be firm with them. Polite, sure, but firm. During the week leading up to Passover, the Temple is a machine. It has to run smoothly because there are too many interdependent parts, ceremonies have to go off in the right order. And if anything, *anything*, vaguely political happens, it feels like the whole Roman army is right outside the gates of the Temple.

Then yesterday. Everyone was exhausted and on edge, but it was going more or less the way it was supposed to. There had been some kind of weird rumor about some guy coming into the city on a donkey and yet people were shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David" and "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matthew 21:9). That's messiah talk. And that's just nuts, because if the Messiah was coming, it wouldn't be the crowd in the street that knew. The priests would know. You had been thinking that whatever the guy on the donkey was doing, he was the civil authorities problem. The Romans probably had him in a jail cell somewhere.

But no. Yesterday, amidst all the crowds and chaos in the Temple courts, this guy shows up. Some jamoke from the Galilee of all places. Galilee is barely in Israel. This wild eyed guy from Galilee and his gang start driving out the people who were buying and selling in the Temple (Matthew 21:12). It took months to get worked out who was going to be where selling what. Before anyone could do anything, he had moved on to the money changers and turned over their tables (Matthew 21:12) and it was complete pandalerium, since there were coins going everywhere and everyone was trying to scoop up the loose money.

All the Jews coming in from all over the Empire can't bring their sacrifices with them. They need to be able to buy them there. And they don't have the Temple coins, so they need to change their money into the right coins. Those buyers and sellers and money changers all have to be there if the Temple is going to work. Plus the Romans have threatened time and again to shut the Temple down. Events like yesterday are just playing into their hands. The Romans are dying to shut down the proper worship of the God of Israel. They'll take any excuse to do so.

So you and your colleagues had to work all night getting everything cleared up and set to rights. You had to soothe all the people who needed soothing and get them set back up again. The more senior guys dealt with the money changers, because they were demanding cash. But you had to deal with the guys selling the doves and the lambs. If you hear about one more cracked cage or busted stool...

So today, it feels like you barely got to wash your face. And you were on duty in the lower courts, when the guy from Galilee comes back. He starts teaching. He, he, in the place where the greatest teachers in all of Israel live and work, he starts teaching. Thank heavens it was the chief priests and the elders who came to speak to him (Matthew 21:23), because you wouldn't have been speaking. There would have been busted noses and people getting dragged out of the Temple. The priests were so cool. They didn't say what they knew was true, that he had no authority to do what he was doing. Instead, they put it on him, "by what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (Matthew 21:23)

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Isn't that always the question when Jesus comes into our lives? We're going along, doing our jobs, doing what is right, loving our neighbors, going to church, filling out our pledge slips and then Jesus shows up and starts turning over tables in our lives. Who gave him the authority to do that? We had worked pretty hard to get all those tables set up that way.

Maybe the first thing to notice with this question is how mild it is. The chief priests are really asking a pretty tame question, considering the circumstances. You can see Jesus' reply as edgy or confrontative, "*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.*" (Matthew 21:24) But you can also hear his reply as him trying to figure out a response that they will understand. He asks them about John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was a self-declared prophet who lived out in the wilderness, as far out on the borders of Israel as it was possible to be and still be in Israel. He preached repentance of sins and offered baptism as a way of being born to new life. He was killed by the authorities, specifically Herod. There are plenty of other people who Jesus could have pointed to but he points to John. But he points to John, a man of his own time, who is clearly coming from Israel's prophetic tradition, but who was on the margins. Jesus' is claiming an authority that not only comes from the margins of society, but also from the heart of its most venerated tradition.¹ He's not claiming religious or political authority.² Unlike John, Jesus is not staying at the edges and having people come to him. Jesus is going to the very heart of the people of Israel and preaching and teaching there.³

The high priests ask him by what authority is he doing all this. Jesus replies, in essence, he's doing this by the same authority that John the Baptist had, that of being a prophet called by God. Jesus puts the decision back in the priests' court, so was John a prophet or not? We get the weasel words from the high priests, "well, we can't really say John was a prophet and we can't really say he wasn't, so let's say we don't know." For the folks who hear this in Jesus' time that answer is even more mealy mouthed than it appears, since one of the roles of the high priests was to say, "that guy's a prophet and that guy's a nut job".⁴ So if they don't know if John's a prophet or not, who does?

Then Jesus tells a parable about two sons. Their dad asks both of them to do some work. One says he won't and then does. The other says he will and then doesn't. Which one is doing the will of the father? And we all know the answer to that. The one who changed his mind.

¹ Kathryn D. Blanchard, "Proper 21, Theological Perspective, Matthew 21:23-32" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 118.

² Blanchard, 118.

³ Blanchard, 118.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Vol. 2. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 258.

But what does that have to do with authority? How is that parable continuing the conversation about where Jesus' authority comes from? At first glance, it's just a story about walking the walk and not just talking the talk. But Jesus goes on, "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" (Matthew 21:32) All of a sudden this little parable about getting our actions match our words is about how the most marginalized people there are, tax-collectors and prostitutes, are doing a better job at identifying prophets than the most highly trained prophet-spotters in the whole culture. All of a sudden this little parable is about recognizing God's work in this world, not just with our brains, but with our feet that walk us out to the edges of the world, out to and into the River Jordan to be baptized. We recognize God is up to something that comes in from the edges of our life and our whole lives get changed. Our whole lives get changed. And as part of that we change our minds. God's actions don't always show up in the expected places, coming through the people who have been trained to recognize them or articulate what God is up to.

A number of you over the past months have come to me and said that God is up to something in the Brookline Community Church. There is something happening here that hasn't happened before. And I agree. I can feel it. I can see it in all sorts of places. But I can't tell you what it is. If anything, I'm personally very worried that in my role as the religious leader of this community, I'm going to make a mistake, and say something or do something that is going to get in the way of whatever is coming into the world here.

But I'm not going to step back because I'm worried. I'm going to step forward. I'm just going to do it the way Paul describes doing it in the reading from Philippians, with fear and trembling. (Philippians 2:12). I'm going to do a three part series on listening to the Holy Spirit, as individuals and as a community, so we can get better at discerning what God is up to. Paul reminds the community at Philippi *for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for [God's] good pleasure* (Philippians 2:13).

God speaks to individuals and through individual lives. I think part of the power we are finding in the family stories that we've been sharing since June has been the growing awareness that God is speaking to all us through our lives together. And some of the power from those family stories is that God is speaking to us as individuals through the lives and stories of others. We recognize God's work in our own lives because of what God has done in other lives. But we have to be willing to listen when God speaks to us directly and to recognize when other people have identified God's will. We have to be willing to change our minds.

Because that's what Jesus is saying at the end of today's reading in Matthew. "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." (Matthew 21:32). The high priests and the elders were trained to spot prophets. But God comes from the margins, from the unexpected places, from the edges of our lives. And sometimes other people, sometimes the people we would least imagine would catch a glimpse of God have a better idea of what God's intentions are. Our job is to be open to that possibility and to change our minds when it's time. Our God invites us to keep a hold of the fear and trembling, so that our first reactions, of holding on to the order in our lives we have worked so hard to build, is something we are willing to let go of when God comes in from the edges.