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Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Authorized to Give You Life”
Text: Matthew 21:23-32

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

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

What had gotten the chief priests and elders of the people all riled up? What caused them to ask such a question?

Well, perhaps we could put it this way: *Jesus was trespassing.*

You see, He was on their turf now. While He was teaching and healing in Galilee and Nazareth and Judea, they didn't like it, but they could, perhaps, put up with it. But now He was on their turf. He was in the Temple. *And He was making it His.*

You see, right before this, Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the waving of palm branches and shouts of Hosanna - that day we call Palm Sunday. And once He did, He made a beeline for the Temple. And when He got there He drove out all who sold and bought and overturned the tables of the money-changers. Then He taught and healed and finally called it a day, going back to Bethany for the night. He had come into the Temple and planted His flag there.

Well, that crossed the line in the sand, the red line, of the chief priests and elders. Before this . . . He can have His fun out there, but when He dies, the people will still be coming back to us here. Still exchanging their money, still buying animals for sacrifice. Things would get back to normal. But this crossed the line.

And they weren't being just completely selfish, the chief priests were descendants of Levi - that tribe God had set aside for this very purpose at this very place. They had the authority to be here and do these things. But this guy . . . Who gave Him the right? Who gave Him the authority?

And, again, they weren't being just completely selfish - it was a good question. What authority did Jesus have to come and make this HIS Temple?

Jesus had *power*. Obviously. No one could deny that. But there's a difference between

power and authority. Perhaps you could think of it this way: power is the ability to do something; authority is the permission or the right to do it. So a gang member and a policeman can both have guns and the power to use them, but only one has the lawful authority to do so. And a policeman doesn't take that authority upon himself. A person cannot just wake up one day and say: I'm going to be a policeman and go out and be one. You have to be given that authority.

We use that word here too, of pastors. What gives me the right to stand here before you Sunday after Sunday and proclaim to you the forgiveness of sins? *As a called and ordained servant of Christ and by His authority.* I did not come here and tell you: I'm going to be your pastor; I'm going to do these things here. I was put here and given this authority. By God, through you.

So, Jesus . . . ***By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?***

Well, Jesus doesn't debate the issue with them. That, He knows, would get Him nowhere. And He doesn't claim authority for Himself. He points to John the Baptist. Where did he get *his* authority?

Jesus isn't just deflecting here, or changing the subject. He's answering an authority question with an authority answer. For John was a prophet. A man sent from God. Everyone knew it. And that gave him the authority, the right to do what he was doing.

But there was this too: a prophet had to speak the truth. If a prophet spoke something that was not the truth, he was no true prophet but a false one. 99% was not good enough for a true prophet. They had to speak the truth 100% of the time or they were out.

And what had John said? What was his testimony? *Repent and be baptized.* But this too - pointing to Jesus he had said: *Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). So was John right or not? Was John a prophet from God or not?

The chief priests and elders had no answer. They didn't want to say John wasn't a prophet because they feared the people who all knew John was. But they hadn't been baptized by John or believed what he said about Jesus. And they still didn't. They were stuck. They hadn't expected such an answer from Jesus, that He did, in fact, have the authority to do this very thing. You almost feel bad for them.

And then Jesus tells them a parable. Actually, He puts *them into* a parable. They were the first son, saying all the right words but not doing what they said. Talking about repentance but not repenting themselves - including when John called them to repentance.

But who did? Who were the ones who listened to John, God's prophet? The vile tax collectors, the evil prostitutes, the unclean, the sinners. And they were baptized. They were washed. They believed. And they are entering the kingdom of God. You need to become like them, Jesus is telling them. *You need to become like them.*

WHOA! Jesus has just crossed a whole new line here! The chief priests and elders spent their whole life saying that the tax collectors and prostitutes had to become good, like them. And here Jesus is saying it is, in fact, the other way around. The chief priests and elders have to become sinners, and repent. Follow the example of the tax collectors and prostitutes. They were sinners, of course. Already. But they had to realize it. Believe it. Believe John. Believe they needed a Saviour. A Lamb of God to take away their sin.

You can see how this message would be offensive to them! And to many today. Even you and me.

Or, maybe not offended. We're Christians, after all. Maybe we're just those who hear God's Word and say . . . *no*.

For honor, serve and obey, love and cherish the authorities God has placed over me? You haven't met my boss, Lord! Or tried living with my parents.

Lead a sexually pure and decent life? Don't go there, Jesus.

Love my enemies and pray for those who hurt me? You've got to be kidding.

Honor God's Word above everything else? But God, I'm busy! I didn't make the schedule. If I don't do what my boss says, I won't get promoted. If I'm not there, I won't start for the team.

Don't be angry? Don't hold a grudge? But Lord . . . ! You don't understand . . .

Be content with what I have? But God, how can I be when that son of a . . . gun neighbor of mine lies and cheats and steals and gets what I should get! What I deserve. It's not fair.

Where is Jesus planting His flag, His cross, in your life, in your heart? Where is He calling you to repentance? What in you needs to die that you don't want to die?

Follow the tax collectors and prostitutes; or today, maybe Jesus would say the murderers and rapists and swindlers. We're no better them, or they than us. All of us need a Lamb of God to take away our sin. And we have one.

He rode into Jerusalem that Palm Sunday. He planted His flag in the Temple. And then He used the authority that His Father had given Him and sent Him with to be the Lamb of

God and lay down His life for you on the cross. To have your sin pounded into Him. To have the flag of your sin, your own little rebellious kingdom, planted right through His heart. That by the blood and water that then flowed from His pierced heart, you be forgiven. Your sin and rebellion atoned for. A sinner in His sight no more.

And you've been so washed in His blood and water. For you've been washed with the baptism given and authorized by Jesus. And there, your sins were not only forgiven, but the gift of the Holy Spirit given to live in you as His Temple. To enlighten you. To create in you a clean heart. To give you those good and holy desires you need. And to give you the desire and strength to not just say, but do what your Father has said. To be the son, the daughter, He has created you to be.

And He has not only *empowered* you to do this, but *authorized* you to do so. To pray and know that your prayer is heard. To do good, and know that He is working good through you. To speak, to confess Him, and know that His Word that you speak is powerful and effective. To forgive those who sin against you. To be His children where He has put you to be.

And when you fall short, struggle, or just outright fail, His forgiveness is here for you still. His Absolution, His Body and Blood, to raise you up again and strengthen you. We'll sing the words of John the Baptist in a moment to remind us of that. *Lamb of God, You take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.* And He does. Putting into your ears His Word of forgiveness, and putting into your mouth His Body and Blood. Planting Himself into you, and making you His. His Temple. His child.

So come and join your fellow sinners here. Come and receive the forgiveness and life of Jesus. Then go and live as the child of God you are. For this is the will of your Father.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.