

One of the speakers at the conference I attended last week is a Presbyterian pastor who added a whole new facet to her ministry in response to some weird questions she started hearing from her youth group members during Covid: things like, “Do you think I’m only a ‘lukewarm’ Christian?” “How do I know that my baptism ‘counts’?” “What if I’m not really saved?”...anxious terminology the pastor knew they’d never heard in their grace-filled Presbyterian upbringing. The students had fallen down a rabbit hole of TikTok videos that came from a much different branch of Christianity. If you know how social media works, the algorithm learns what grabs and holds our attention and then shows us more and more of that kind of content—reinforcing the views we already hold and never even showing us other perspectives. So the more the students watched those fear-mongering videos, the more they started to believe that was the only message Christianity had to offer. The pastor, realizing that her congregation heard about the love and grace of Jesus for an hour on Sunday mornings at church, but then heard fire and brimstone the whole rest of the week, started using TikTok herself to share more of the good news of the gospel, sometimes in direct response to the hellfire and damnation videos. She ended up with a few hundred thousand people following her—including people who hold those very different views of the faith. And some of them were really mad. But it was hard for them to argue with the scripture that she shared, because it’s scripture. And it was hard for them to claim that she just doesn’t know or understand scripture, because she has a Master’s degree in biblical studies. So, unable to argue with her content, they attacked her wardrobe; they attacked her physical appearance; and of course, they attacked her for being a woman. How convenient that so many of our Christian brothers don’t have to listen to or learn anything from half of the earth’s population...Our gospel today reminds us that it’s an old page to take from the playbook to question someone’s authority when we don’t have a legitimate argument against what they’re saying or doing.

The lectionary has moved us along in Matthew’s narrative to what we know as Holy Week, the last few days before Jesus’ death. So that means that when the chief priests and elders ask Jesus by what authority he is doing *these things*, *these things* include virtually everything he has done in his years of public ministry: healing and feeding people, driving out demons, restoring sight to the blind, teaching and preaching a radical re-orientation of what it means to be beloved of God—blessed are the poor, the hungry, the merciful, and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. But they are also talking about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, making a political parody of the Roman procession by which Pontus Pilate would have arrived to “keep peace” during Passover. And they are talking about Jesus driving the money changers out of the Temple, disrupting the economy that supported the priesthood. And they are talking about the crowds calling out *Hosanna* (that is, *Save us!*) *Son of David*...and Jesus not stopping or correcting them. Jesus is not interested in taking over the Temple by supplanting the priests and elders or taking over the government by raising an army against the Roman

Empire. However, he has challenged the authority of everyone in those positions of power by teaching a different way of looking at the world and living in it.

The chief priests and elders are not entirely honest in their question: they don't really want to know what authority Jesus has to do what he has done. Their response to Jesus' question about John's baptism shows this. They don't debate John's credentials, just what is the most politically savvy answer that the people will want to hear because they admit that they're afraid of the crowds. Neither the source of Jesus' nor John's authority matters to them; they only care about challenges to *their* authority, because that's what puts their power at risk.

Of course, prestige and political power were never supposed to be the aim of the religious leaders. During the Exodus, God established the priesthood to facilitate worship and to help the people of Israel make offerings of thanksgiving and sacrifices that freed them from guilt and sin. When the religious leaders of Jesus' day saw the tax collectors and prostitutes following John's call to repentance, they should have rejoiced and recognized a partner in their work. When they saw revival happening because of Jesus' preaching and healing, they should have recognized his fulfillment of the scriptures. If they had remembered that their purpose was to serve all the people of Israel, and they saw John and Jesus reaching the kinds of people who had been pushed to the margins of their society, they might have appreciated how God's kingdom was coming to earth. But they had lost sight of their calling and their purpose; all they could see was a threat to their power and position.

With 2,000 years' hindsight and our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, it would be easy for us to criticize the chief priests and elders: how could they miss that Jesus' authority came from God when Jesus *was* God? How could they not welcome the good things Jesus and John were doing for the people and not prioritize that good over their own position and power? But we would be fools or hypocrites to think that the history of the Christian church is not filled with that same short-sightedness. Jesus commissioned his disciples to spread the good news, not limit who can share and who can receive it. Jesus blesses the peacemakers; nowhere does Jesus bless the gate-keepers. Yet time and again, we who are part of the religious establishment deny that the Spirit can work outside of our boundaries—boundaries *we* have constructed, not God.

Jesus is, as always, gracious: he doesn't keep anyone out of the kingdom. But those who were traditionally excluded from the fellowship of faith were the ones who recognized God's grace in John and Jesus' ministry; the insiders who should have known better, didn't. So those who had been pushed to the sides were going into the kingdom first—not instead of, but ahead of those who couldn't yet see God at work. There are still plenty of Christians out there whose chief concern is keeping others out—out of the community, out of the pulpit, out of heaven itself. Let's not do that. May we be faithful children of God who don't just say we follow Christ but who do follow him—in loving, serving, and welcoming *all* people as Jesus did.