

By What Authority...or Who Says So?

From the series: The Faith Of Jesus: Trust in a Gracious God

Text: Jeremiah 7:1; Mark 11:27-28

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord... Jeremiah 7:1

The Chief Priest, Scribes, and the Elders came to him and said, "By what authority are you doing these things?" Mark 11:27-28

Jesus died the way he died because he lived the way he lived. And he lived the way he lived because of what he believed essentially, at his heart, what he believed about God. These Lenten weeks we are trying to determine the faith of Jesus. I have suggested that right at the heart of that faith was the conviction that God was gracious. That God was near. That one could trust God to be gracious and near, never to let one go. That seems rather harmless. Why in the world would Jesus get into trouble for believing that? But you see, he *acted* on that conviction.

He *acted* on the conviction that God's grace embraced all. And so in his table fellowship he sat down with all sorts of people and became very threatening to those who had drawn lines and circles to include some and exclude others. He reached out, touched the leper, and healed the leper, contrary to the whole social structure of the day, which ostracized the leper and placed the leper outside of community. He took on his religious establishment in terms of its ritual and its perfunctory performance. He didn't fast with his disciples. He didn't keep the fast. And in terms of the Sabbath, although he observed Sabbath as a gift of God, he did not keep it legalistically, so that it became inhumane. He realized that all religion, all religious ritual, all religious observance ought to be for the enhancement of our humane existence and not a burden on it. And so in all of that he was threatening to the religious establishment.

Religion sets down codes and pathways, and observances and performances, and obligations and demands, and then it says to us, "Fulfill those and all will be well." But Jesus said, "No." In order to be well, do only those things that will enhance your spiritual life and your sense of the presence of God.

Finally, after his ministry in Galilee – which was no bucolic backwater as it is so often pictured but, rather, Galilee of the Gentiles, Galilee where the international trade routes crisscrossed. Galilee included Nazareth and, within four miles, Sepphoris, which was the capital of the Galilean territory of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas made Sepphoris a great city with theatre and temple and civic works. It was called the Ornament of Galilee – Jesus, after carrying on his ministry there, provocative as it was, knew nonetheless, that finally he had to bring his message to Jerusalem.

In the Synoptic Gospels we have Jesus going to Jerusalem just once. In John's Gospel, he seems to go back and forth, observing the feasts there on more than one occasion. We can't know which is more correct, but in any case, the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, give us the sense that Jesus finally headed to Jerusalem in order to bring things to a head. Jesus knew that he would have to confront the religious establishment at its central shrine. It was one thing to carry on that ministry and to make his claims in Galilee; it was another to come to the very precincts of the temple and make his claim.

Those who study these things debate as to whether Jesus was finally calling the religious establishment to account, or whether perhaps even unconsciously Jesus was calling God to show God's self as to whether or not his ministry was indeed a ministry of God's Spirit. Do you think he ever wondered about that? Is your Jesus such that he just plowed through his life and the events to the cross without wavering, or is there room in your Jesus for questioning and self-doubt? I wonder. Anyone who made the claims that he made, anyone who caused the waves that he caused, anyone who went to the root of things – that is, was the radical that he was – I suspect there were those times all alone when he looked into the heavens, into the starry night, and wondered. Couldn't it be possible that he needed to go to Jerusalem to know indeed whether or not he was right?

In any case, he came, and in that movement into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, a bold prophetic act itself, he comes finally into the temple precincts. We speak of "cleansing the temple," but it wasn't the cleansing of the temple. It was a prophetic act. It was a symbolic act. It was like all of the Old Testament prophets who would do some action to underscore their word.

I don't think that Jesus was against the temple, or against the priesthood, or against the sacrificial system. I think Jesus was a Jew - every inch of him a Jew, a believing Jew. I think it was a matter of his understanding of what it meant to be a Jew. What it meant to be a person in the covenant of God's grace. What it means to be a son of Yahweh. But he went into the very center, the very heart, into the shrine itself. And in this symbolic act - well, it might have been nothing more than going into the parlor and turning over a table or two and causing a bit of a stir in order to get some attention, and make his proclamation. He certainly didn't empty the whole thing out. Actually what was going on there was quite legitimate. It was absolutely necessary for the whole temple to operate. Jesus was

not attacking that which was happening. He was rather taking his message and his claim into the heart and into the center of his own tradition, into its central shrine and saying, “This is all relativized in the name of the God who is beyond all of our particular expressions of God.”

Jesus was calling for repentance and renewal - a fresh grasp of what God was calling his people to be. And in so doing, he challenged the whole established system of things. That’s really quite amazing isn’t it? What he did there was to act out what he had been doing as we have seen in these past weeks: sitting at table with all kinds of people, touching the leper, not observing the fast, keeping the Sabbath as he understood God intended it to be kept – all of those things threatening to that carefully prescribed way of doing things. The religious system - he challenged it. What would we think if we who have been imbibed and nurtured and saturated with Christian faith, we who have been brought from the baptismal font, taught that Jesus is the only Saviour of the world and Christian faith is the final and last revelation of God’s truth, and the only means by which the world might be saved – what would we do if one came in and challenged those assumptions? If one started to erase the lines that we have drawn and to tear down the barriers that we have erected, dismantling the structure that we have built? Overturning those tables was what Jesus was about, concretely and symbolically.

He went into the temple itself, and through that symbolic, prophetic action said, “God doesn’t need this temple. God doesn’t need this priesthood. God doesn’t need these sacrifices. All of these are means, and quite legitimate means when used properly for the mediation of the presence of God and the grace of God, but God needs none of them. And to the extent that you absolutize them, to that extent you falsify them and you go against God.”

Well, as I asked, “What might we say?” Might we not also come to him, this destabilizer, and raise the obvious question: “By what authority do you do this? How dare you! Says who?” That was the issue. You see the assumption is – and I suppose that it is a natural assumption and probably we all share it – the assumption is that there is some norm, some standard, there is some kind of absolute by which things are measured and constructed and by which observances are carried out. Some kind of absolute norm. There was an assumption that the whole temple apparatus was not only a true means of access to God, but it was the one absolute. And that, apart from it, God would be quite disabled and people totally handicapped. Jesus simply called all of that into question.

So by what authority? He was being questioned by those who were orthodox. To be orthodox was to have the correct opinion or the correct understanding or doctrine. There is a truth. It has been spoken. It has been revealed. It can be articulated. And it must be embraced and followed and obeyed. That is characteristic of religion in general. The orthodox line is the correct line. It is the

true line. In all of the religions that line is absolutized and eternalized. It is not seen as a historically conditioned expression of faith in God, and experience of God at one point or another, but as something above time. And now, once it is articulated, you may not think about it any more. All you do is hear it, accept it, and pass it on.

Hans Küng, one of my favorite theologians, can no longer teach those who are preparing for the priesthood for the Roman Church because he has dared to challenge the orthodox line of the Roman Church. And so, if you take his courses now, you don't get credit for them in your preparation for the priesthood.

Jesus was a destabilizer of the orthodoxy of the Judaism of his day, and they crucified him. All of the Gospel writers connect the temple incident with his death. It would seem that was the friction point. That was the climactic moment. That was the time they said, "He's got to go." But in order to make it appear as though they were reasonable, they came to him and said, "By what authority?" They weren't serious, and he knew it. So he said, "I'll answer you if you will answer me. What about John the Baptist?" Of course, he had them, because they didn't want to acknowledge that John was a prophet of God, operating in the spirit of God. But if they didn't acknowledge John, the people would be after them. So they simply declined to answer, and he declined to answer. And that question remains unanswered, that burning question, "By what authority?"

Do you ever raise that question to me? Do you ever wonder by what authority I say what I say, and do what I do? What will I say? Well, if I was in the Greek Orthodox tradition I would say, "tradition," that whole blessed tradition back to the first century. If it is in the tradition, there's no question. The prayers and the rituals in that tradition are repeated down through the centuries. That tradition in all of its glory and all of its splendor. If I were in the Roman Catholic tradition I would say, "the ecclesiastical authority of the Vatican Office of Teaching." The Roman Catholic tradition, in order to steel itself against the acids of modernity relatively recently in terms of Church history, postulated the infallibility of the Pope, would you believe? And, of course, being poor Protestants in our fragmented pitiable state, coming out of the great Roman Church in the sixteenth century, we needed something upon which to base our claim, and so we've invented a paper pope - this inerrant, infallible Word of God.

All religions need authority. All religions have a lust for certitude. All religions do their best to absolutize, to get it clear in black and white, it's dotted, it's crossed, no loose ends, and no questions allowed. So they said to Jesus, "How dare you? Who are you? By what authority?" Do you ever say that to me under your breath? There are congregations all over the world that would not tolerate what you tolerate. They would walk out - en masse, because they do not come to struggle in the presence of God for what is true, but to have reinforced what they already know. Religions are full of answers, and too often unwilling to ask the questions.

What would Jesus do if he came today? A world full of papal infallibility, and Ayatollah's, and church bureaucrats and pastors like myself, televangelists, all of us who know too much. Not always right, but always certain. He would do his very best, I believe, to destabilize. I think he would try to destabilize Jewish fundamentalism, and the rabbinical office in Jerusalem that is determining who can be a Jew and who cannot be a Jew, and imposing the rigid interpretations of orthodoxy on all of those people. I think he would have a field day in the Vatican. He would suggest that it is long overdue to take away that statement "outside of the Church, no salvation," particularly the Roman Catholic Church. And he would go to the World Council of Churches, but he wouldn't know to whom to talk. It's just kind of a mess. I think he would say to these three great prophetic religions that all find their basis somehow or other here, he would say, "Until I can destabilize you, until I can shatter your foundations and tear down your structure, you will all be absolutizing yourselves, and cursing each other, and excommunicating each other. You will be bringing your world, if not through nuclear holocaust, to a religious war, and a kind of terrorism. You see someone has said that Jesus, in his interpretation of the Torah, his understanding of that tradition, would have advocated a politics of compassion.

Politics. Politics, the arrangement of things, the whole structure of things. Jesus came advocating a politics of compassion, the unbrokered presence of God. The unmediated presence of the grace of God in this world, and in all of creation. He opposed the whole temple establishment, which was the politics of holiness, which was a way to separation - an exclusiveness, separation, dividing of peoples. Religion has been the great divider of people. Jesus was crucified because he tore down walls and broke down barriers, because he believed that God would gather all God's children into one.

Dominic Crossan's recent book *The Historical Jesus* is a very careful, methodical, historical search using the very latest methods of historiography. I think it was a year ago I shared with you, from an interview with Crossan in the *Christian Century*, a conversation that he imagines: Jesus says, "Dominic, you've done a fine job. Congratulations." And Dominic says, "Thank you, Jesus. You liked my book, and the method is good, isn't it?" "Yes, it is Dominic. And, thank you for being honest and not diluting my claims. Now, I suppose, Dominic, now that you see that, you are willing to join me in my program. And you've been captured as well by my vision." Dominic, "No, I don't have the courage, Jesus. But I've put it out there, haven't I? Is that enough?" "No, Dominic. It's not enough."

I could continue that conversation a bit, "So, Jesus, by what authority?" "It's what I've got to do. It is the Spirit of God. It is the passion of my life. It is all I know. I must be true to that which the Spirit of God tells me to do." "Then you die."

"Then I'll die."

Reference:

John Dominic Crossan. *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1991.