

**Philippians 2: 1-13**  
**Matthew 21: 23-32**  
**September 28, 2014**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

Several months ago on the *Daily Show* there was a recording of a debate in the New York State legislature. A teacher of a school thought it would be a great civics lesson to get their local representative to present a bill to the legislature. They would come to Albany to see how the democratic process worked. The students and teacher decided, in light of the popularity of a locally made Greek yogurt to propose a law that would make Greek yogurt the official snack of the state of New York.

Thinking that this was a “no brainer” the (Republican) legislator moved the adopting of this proposal. What followed was a bizarre and excruciating series of trivial questions all designed to discredit the bill. Toward the end the legislator who had proposed this feel good bill started giggling at the preposterous nature of the questions. The students received a civics lesson alright!

Some people found this, in a dark way, to be funny. I found it to be depressing. I am no fan of any product being the official product of anything or anybody. But given all the weighty issues needing to be addressed, this evidence of stubborn and partisan stupidity overwhelmed me with despair. Hoping this farce was being staged to illustrate debate, I was told that no, it was serious.

I reference this sad episode to illustrate the dynamics of the incident described by Matthew. Jesus is teaching in the temple in Jerusalem. He is approached by the religious leaders. They are prepared with a question. “By what authority do you do the things you do?”

They are not truly interested in his answer. They are trying to trap him into a statement which will justify a charge of blasphemy. Blasphemy in Judaism is the brazen claim of a human being to be or represent God. It is the most flagrant expression of that worst of sins, idolatry—the worshiping of something or someone other than God. Make no mistake: idolatry is indeed the most dangerous of sins. It is responsible for every abuse of God’s creation. Any time we put anything above the ultimate source of life we do terrible things. Idolatry causes us to take our eyes off of God and to put them on something that will grant us a more immediate sense of security and control and self-gratification. Idolatry is also subtle. We may say, “In God we trust;” but if we look at our actual behavior, does the way we live as individuals and as a nation demonstrate trust in God—really?

The problem presented by Jesus was very difficult for the religious leaders of the day. We who receive the faith of two thousand years that Jesus *was* the perfect expression of God on earth may well judge the ones who doubted this charismatic figure from the hinterlands was the messiah. All we have to do is ask ourselves, as many have done, “If Jesus came today into our midst would we recognize him?” The informal and highly unscientific poll that I have conducted over the years indicates the belief that we might well crucify him all over again.

This sobering possibility makes the encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders very relevant to us. There is every reason to believe that if we were living in their day and in their shoes would have done what they did. With them we would have perceived Jesus as a threat to all that gave sense to life. We would have seen Jesus as someone who was destabilizing our carefully constructed attempts to have God and worldly possessions. Already Jesus was setting loose dangerous teachings that all people are children of God. All are

welcome in God's presence. God has a particular love for those who are cast out by the mainstream world whether it is the homeless alcoholic, or the billionaire tax cheat. Lest we who are neither of these take solace in our sins which are just ordinary and middle of the road—and so we believe—secret, Jesus ups the ante. He says anger is equivalent to murder; lust after someone else other than your life partner is adultery. Failure to keep all but one of God's commands is a denial of all of them.

And yet, when he encounters a woman convicted of adultery and about to be stoned to death, he confronts her executioners with the simple statement, "You who are without sin, step up and cast the first stone." No one remained. Knowing that adultery is often the fruit of a long series of fractures in the marriage vow and that, in his day, no *man* was convicted of adultery; Jesus has mercy on the woman. He tells her that, because she is worthy of forgiveness and mercy she can live a life of integrity and need not keep looking—in the words of Jerry Jeff Walker-- for love in all the wrong places.

This was a welcome message to the many people. Yet the person and teaching of Jesus and his growing following not only among the poor and outcast and women, but also merchants and some very affluent people caused profound fear among the religious establishment that they would lose their place in Jesus' kingdom of God-- where "the first would be last."

And so it is fear that motivates the questions. It is fear of the loss of place. It is the fear that in the world of the kingdom of God they would perhaps be no important than the beggar on the street. And so they ask Jesus, "By what authority do you do these things?" If Jesus says, "By God's authority" they have him. He can be convicted of blasphemy and executed.

So, be honest, where do we find our place in the story? We want to be loved and respected by the people of this world but we also identify with the ones who are cast out. We like to be comfortable among those who are comfortable; yet we are grateful to be part of a community which welcomes us and is willing to be *uncomfortable with the uncomfortable*. We want to be that wealthy aristocrat who has “the common touch.”

Yet if we really follow Jesus we realize that Jesus placed no value on his place in the world. In the powerful words of Paul, “he did not count equality with God something to be held onto and exploited for his own benefit, but became a slave. And being found in human form became obedient to death—even death on the cross.” With Jesus there is no cake and eat it too.

It takes courageous faith to follow Jesus. And when we welcome the people Jesus welcomed and care about the things Jesus cared about we may well be perceived as subversive as he was. And this perception will possibly come first from fellow Christians who may well ask, “By what authority do you do these things?” Amen.