

October 1, 2017
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-13

LORD OF ALL

The Gospel lesson today takes place during what we now call Holy Week; that period between Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the crucifixion. This story happens the day after Jesus has caused his famous scene in the Temple, turning over the tables chasing out the merchants and calling them a bunch of robbers. After that remarkable act of protest—it was nothing less than civil disobedience for which he could have been arrested then and there—he went and spent the night with his friend Lazarus in Bethany, got up early the next day and headed back into the city for more in-your-face evangelism. [Read]

I occasionally find myself in conversation with someone who is looking for a church home. Sometimes it's people who grew up in the church and have drifted away. Sometimes it is people who are not being spiritually fed at their most recent church. Occasionally, it is an unchurched person who is feeling the Holy Spirit's tug, although those folks don't know that is what it is. I really want them to visit us, but you have to be careful in these conversations because, you don't want to sound desperate or overbearing, but you don't want to sound like you really don't care one way or the other.

Among the folks who are unchurched or who drifted away as a young adult, when I say: "well you should come to our church," the response often is something like: "Well, I'm looking for a non-denominational church." Or: "Well, I don't believe what Presbyterians believe." They say things like "I'm more of a free spirit," "I don't like a bunch of rules or people telling me what I have to believe." "I like to think for myself."

Then, I have a really hard time keeping my irritation to myself. The last thing you want to do when you're talking to someone who is feeling the Holy Spirit moving them toward church, is let them know that they don't know what they're talking about. But it irks me when people are sure they don't want to be Presbyterian when clearly they don't have a clue about what it means to be Presbyterian.

So, just a moment of Presbyterianism 101. Presbyterians understand that there is only one head of the church and that is Jesus Christ. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. (Matt. 28:18) So, we are equal to, not superior to, or exclusive of, anyone else who is a member of the church of Jesus Christ. He alone is king of kings. He alone is the Lord of all. It is to him alone that we bend our knee and bow our heads.

Our constitution affirms that all who are ordained to church office shall "adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith." But the thing is, there is no list or definition of what those essentials are. Essentially, we, like all Christians believe in the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever Amen. Beyond that, we're hard pressed to name the essentials. But one of the most important ear-marks of our denomination is that freedom of individual conscience is to be maintained [G-2.0105]. We believe that "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and [and God has made our conscience] free from the doctrines and commandments of men . . ." [F-3.0101]

We are all about being free spirits, and thinking for yourself. We are all about rejection of a bunch of rules and regulations that are human creations rather than Divine commandments. We believe God gave us brains to hear his word, to ponder it, to use our spiritual and intellectual gifts to grow in our understanding, and to figure out how to live by it. That is what is essential to being Presbyterian.

But you can't go around telling people "the good thing about being Presbyterian is that you can believe whatever you want to believe" because that is not exactly accurate either. The effect of this freedom of conscience, this understanding that God alone is Lord of the conscience, is a huge responsibility. It demands self-examination, education, and critical thinking. As much as I might wish it were otherwise, you can't just sit there and listen to a sermon every week and believe what the preacher tells you to believe. You have to think for yourself. It means using the good brains God gave you.

A Presbyterian pastor I know once told me that someone left his church for a non-denominational church up the road because, according to the former member: "I don't want to have to think so hard. I'm never sure about things after you preach, but when I go to this other church, they just tell you what to believe."

It's a catch-22. We lose people because we don't make it simple and tell them what you have to believe and we lose people because they think that we do make a bunch of rules and tell them what they have to believe.

It has been going on a long time. The chief priests of the temple ask Jesus: **"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"** They're trying to put him into a catch 22 position. Does he claim his authority comes either from the emperor or from them, the church leaders? And they know no such authority has been bestowed. Or does he claim his authority comes from God, which would have been blasphemous and subjected him to immediate arrest.

The time has not quite come for that, so Jesus won't be caught in a trap. Like a good rabbi, he wants to make them think: **Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"** Well, like good Jewish rabbis and Christian ministers, they have to argue with each other about what is the correct answer. There is the obvious conundrum explained by Matthew: They know the crowds

considered John a great prophet such as had led Israel in the time of the great Kings. If the church leaders suggest that John was just a regular politician, they might have a riot on their hands. But the repercussions go beyond that. Remember what John himself said about Jesus: "**The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.** Mark 1:7 So, if they say that John came on God's authority, they will affirm the Divine nature of Jesus. So, they are caught in their own catch-22.

You have to think for yourself, but you also have to work together. Paul told the church in Philippi: "**Work out your own salvation.**" He doesn't mean work as in do enough good works so you'll be saved. He means figure out how to live according to the word of God. Together. Not in a vacuum and not in a cookie cutter community where you only have to listen to what you want to hear, talk to and worship with people who think and act just like you do. Nope. When it gets hard, when people have trouble figuring out what the Word of God means, work it out. Use the good brains God gave you. Make Jesus the Lord of your conscience and act accordingly, remembering always that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him alone. He alone is King of kings and Lord of All.