

Maybe We Should Ask Permission

Today's Gospel drops us into an argument between Jesus and the Temple authorities. It's been just two days since Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, a single day since he strode into the Temple and started turning over tables, disrupting the Temple's lucrative trade in sacrificial animals. Mark tells us that, when the chief priests and scribes heard what Jesus did, "they kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching." Now, they have their chance. Jesus has returned to the Temple and is teaching that spellbound crowd. But when they confront Jesus, the priests and scribes don't attack him. Instead, they ask seemingly innocuous questions: "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?"

The Greek word that the Gospels use here, *exousia* (ἐξουσία), translates as "authority," but not just in the secular sense. *Exousia* refers, especially in later Judaism, to spiritual power and moral authority. Authority was a very important element of everything that happened at the Temple. The sacrificial system was scrupulously maintained in strict observance of Adonai's explicit instructions, and only those who had been authorized by the Temple priests were permitted to teach. We needn't make the cynical assumption that the priests and scribes were concerned only about their own power and prestige when they questioned Jesus. They may well have been sincerely devout and honestly outraged by what they understood to be a Nazarene peasant's profanation of Adonai's holy Temple and misrepresentation of sacred texts. The neutral tone of their questions probably says less about the depth of their distress than it does about the size and fervor of the crowd that surrounded our Lord. The priests and scribes may not have believed they could safely silence Jesus but, from their perspective, he lacked the authority to teach and act in the Temple no matter how passionate his followers might be.

In modern America, we don't tend to think about authority so much as we think about rights. We like to say that "this is a free country," meaning that we enjoy lots of discretion to do whatever we please. There are exceptions, of course. You need a license to drive a car, get married, teach in the public schools, or practice law or medicine. Many professions and private institutions impose additional requirements. For example, the Episcopal Church only authorizes me to absolve, bless and consecrate because I met the church's standards and have been ordained as a priest. But our cultural bias leans toward freedom of action, expression, and belief, which may be why so many of us believe that it's better to ask forgiveness than permission.

There's a lot to be said for a bias in favor of personal freedom, but we don't always consider the impact of millions of people acting on their personal preferences. For example, single-use disposable plastics offer a lightweight, durable, and convenient way to transport and store consumer goods. That's great, but our dependence on single use plastics means that we're generating over fourteen million tons of solid plastic waste each year. Although our legal system is starting to address the problem, any attempt to limit plastic production and use inevitably runs into opposition from those who like the convenience of disposable plastics, along with those who disagree on principle with any attempt to limit their personal freedoms. Until the laws catch up, our best bet is to persuade consumers voluntarily to give up single use plastics. However, as efforts to ban smoking demonstrated, it typically takes twenty years and billions of dollars to get a majority of people to give up a bad habit, and about 12% of American adults still smoke despite the warnings. If efforts to ban single use plastics achieve the same level of success as efforts to curb smoking have, our children and grandchildren will inherit a world that's heavily polluted with microplastics. They will suffer for our carelessness. We can ask their forgiveness, but I wonder how quick they'll be to let us off the hook.

When the priests and scribes ask Jesus to identify the source of his *exousia*, they presume that he lacks authority to teach in the Temple, much less to disrupt the Temple's system for ritual sacrifices. We know that's not true, but only because we know what the priests and scribes do not: Jesus is the anointed Son of the most high God, divine himself and with full authority to do whatever he wants in the Temple and anywhere else. When Jesus asks them to identify the source of John the Baptist's authority, their fear of the crowd distorts their answer. If they thought John's baptism came from God, they wouldn't be afraid to say so, which tells me that they're deeply invested in believing that only those who have permission from the religious hierarchy can legitimately exercise spiritual power. John didn't get the Temple's permission to baptize, ergo his baptism couldn't have come from God. Jesus invites them to look beyond the bureaucracy, to consider the possibility that God might be doing something new in the world, investing John as well as Jesus with authority beyond anything the Temple can convey. The priests and scribes can't imagine that, but we can, and we must, because our Lord proves it's true.

Jesus acts under his own authority. We might take that as an invitation to do the same, but we have to be careful here. John's ministry was preordained by Adonai, prophesied by Isaiah seven centuries before his birth. None of us has that kind of credential. And wholly divine or not, Jesus was in constant communication with his Father and always scrupulous about doing the divine will. Until we're equally certain about the Father's desires, we should be very cautious about presuming to act in his name.

But we can, and should, look around and consider how the Father might feel before we act in ways that have the potential to do lasting damage. Our passage from Ezekiel tells us that God does not punish children for their parents' iniquity. Each of us is responsible for our own actions, and each of us can repent and be restored to right relationship with God. But repentance

isn't just about breast-beating shame. It's about examining our choices and their consequences, then renouncing bad habits and committing ourselves to acting in the way we believe God wishes we would. That takes time, prayer, and discernment, along with enough healthy humility to recognize that the will of the Lord won't always fall into line with our personal agendas.

Ordained or not, I can't pretend to perfectly understand God's will. I see through a glass darkly just like everybody else. But it seems to me that a God who refrains from punishing children for the sins of their parents would probably prefer that we try not to punish them with the consequences of our selfish choices. Whether it's single use plastic, resource depletion, climate change, or mass extinction, we're making a colossal mess of the world that our children will inherit, and I imagine God very much wishes we'd knock it off. Fortunately, God has blessed us with enormous freedom of choice and action. That freedom is accompanied by enormous responsibility to act with love and in accordance with God's will as we understand it. It requires us to consider our actions, remembering to ask God's permission before we do anything that's likely to have long-term consequences instead of just expecting God and our descendants to forgive us for the mess we've made. May we worry a little less about protecting our established institutions and individual liberties, and a little more about pleasing our God and protecting our children. If we do, we'll have all the *exousia* we could ever need. Amen.