Let us pray: Merciful God, you continually show us your ways of forgiveness and steadfast love. Remember not our sins, but recall your compassion to your children, satisfy the longing of your people, and fulfill all our hopes for eternal peace through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen

So today I return to the gospel reading for my message. Hearing about Joseph and his brothers and then Jonah’s issues with God over Nineveh the past two weeks, today we have Jesus being challenged by the chief priests and the elders about his authority. So the chief priests and elders ask Jesus inside the Temple, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you that authority?”

Authority seems to be a big issue in our world today. Politicians claim they have the authority to do what they are doing because of their elected status.
There are times when we hear someone say, “Who said you could do that?”

Another words, “By what or whose authority are you doing what you are doing?”

Parents have the authority over their children until they are 18 and then the child earns his or her wings and can claim some of their own authority over what they do, unless of course they are still living at home. But even with that they still can claim some authority as now there are certain things they are now permitted to do such as vote.

In our communities, there are parts of the community’s work that is delegated to a special entity such as the water or sewer authority. They have the job of seeing after these things for the community. They are given their authority by the leadership of the community and the community itself as the community elects its leaders. When someone hands over their power of attorney to someone, they are giving that person the authority to make decisions on their behalf. Today we hear about the authority of Jesus and who gave him his authority.

When I read this I had to ask myself who gave the chief priests and the elders their authority. The chief priests are normally born into that position and the elders are the wealthy members of the community who support the Temple and its work. They were sort of the lay leadership of the Temple just by virtue of
their status in the community. Today we have the encounter in our gospel with
the chief priests and elders challenging Jesus’ authority. Why the challenge?

If we go back just a couple of verses in Matthew’s story, Jesus has just
entered Jerusalem in celebration and his first encounter in the Temple was him
turning over the tables and cleansing the Temple of the money changers. So
Jesus makes a big splash in his initial meeting with the authorities. He is now
teaching in the Temple when the chief priests and elders approach him with their
questions about his authority. Jesus had said to them when turning over the
tables and chasing folks out of the Temple, “My house shall be called a house of
prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.” It appears that Jesus is
reclaiming the Temple for its true purpose and the authority that he has comes
from God.

Jesus is challenged by the very authorities who have allowed the Temple to
become a “Den of robbers.” They were the ones most affected by Jesus’ actions
by their loss of income. Jesus’ response reveals a political insight that we may
forget to attribute to Jesus, as he renders his opponents mute with a single clever,
and political fraught question. Jesus then tells them a parable justifying, or at
least illustrating, the overturning of expectations and reversal of fortunes he both
announced and inaugurates.
Who gave Jesus the authority to do these things? Well, we know it's God but the authorities resist because they fear what would happen to them if they answer Jesus’ questions incorrectly. They are caught in a trap that they actually set. Think about it. By what authority and who gave you that authority is their question. The reality is that they thought they were setting Jesus up because they refused to recognize his authority. They refused to acknowledge its origin from God and the nature of Jesus’ life giving service. Jesus has shown his authority to teach and to heal and forgive to be superior, but they still refused to recognize Jesus’ authority.

The chief priests and elders questions are a trap. If Jesus claims his own authority, he admits to having no institutional or cultural legitimacy, and appears to have acted against God’s purposes and certainly against theirs. If Jesus claims God’s authority, he blasphemes and violates their jurisdiction. In this challenge of honor, Jesus does not respond directly but outwits them. The central issue is not Jesus’ identity but whether they will recognize it. The reality of the story is that the questioners become the questioned.

Jesus challenges to the authorities are a windfall in which the winner gains honor and power at the loser’s expense. If Jesus were to lose any of the challenges brought to him by the authorities, his ability of teaching and being in
the Temple would come to an end, his challenge to the authorities in Jerusalem would end, and the leaders would regain control of the Temple. The reality is if the authorities win in the question and answer game there would be no need to crucify Jesus. They would have gained the authority that they claim is theirs and the people would be on their side and they would challenge Jesus’ actions.

We all know that tussles over authority are not new. As I mentioned earlier, we are witnessing this power playing out in the political arena as we approach the November third election. We are being bombarded by the junk mail, TV ads, phone calls, and by rallies by the candidates. They are juggling for position and poll ratings at this point. We see the challenge to the community’s authorities through protests over racial justice issues. We see the jockeying going on over filling the Supreme Court seat vacated by the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Who has the authority to dictate remedies for the people over the response to the pandemic? The question of “by whose authority” is going to be a question for us to answer. When it comes to Jesus, his authority comes from God and his actions are by design from God. This is the hope that we have for ourselves at this most difficult time in history.

As the gospel passage goes on, Jesus tells the authorities a parable about two sons. One is asked to go to the vineyard to work and says no and the second
son says that he will go but doesn’t go. Jesus is placing the question right back in the chief priests and elders lap with this parable. Jesus asks them, “Which of the two did the will of his father?” The response is that the first son went and did the will of his father. Jesus tells them they are correct and then here is the catch to all of Jesus’ words in our gospel, “Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God **ahead** of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him, and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

Jesus is offering the chief priests and elders the opportunity to go into the kingdom when he says the tax collectors and prostitutes will go into the kingdom **AHEAD** of them. He is saying the tax collectors and prostitutes will go ahead of them and not **instead** of them. You see, God takes no note of station in life. God pays attention not to roles but to the heart and our actions. But while this precludes the rulers entering first, as they may have expected, after all, they are the chief priests and leaders of the people—they are not banished. So even despite their shortcoming, there is still room for them. Still room, that is, for those who have been corrupted by power; room even for those who neglect their duties or perhaps even exploit their stations; room even for those who reject
Christ’s words and deeds, just as they rejected John’s. There is room for all people.

Does the room have conditions attached to it? Jesus’ parable is giving them and us the possible grace that comes to us. The tax collectors and prostitutes first said no to the Word but then believed and went to the vineyard to work and the chief priests and elders said yes to the word and going into the vineyard to work but then did not go. They were not doing the will of God that they were charged to do but they still had the opportunity to go into the kingdom but it was up to them to turn around and allow the grace of God guide them.

Even amid the height of Jesus’ struggle with his adversaries; even in the last week of his life; even as he faces betrayal, accusation, desertion, and crucifixion; yet Jesus imagines more room in the kingdom of God than anyone would imagine or have a right to expect. That, at this particular time, seems like awfully good news.

Jesus offers us a message of grace that regularly stretches beyond our imagination and startles us with its depth. God continually reaches out to us and to the tax collectors and prostitutes and the chief priests and elders with the gift of acceptance and love and forgiveness that are the hallmarks of the kingdom
Jesus proclaims. So, instead of such a push for authority maybe it’s time for us to think about the kingdom and what that really means for us. Amen.

Let us pray: O Lord, you are the giver of life for all people. Help us to follow your paths for us and to be mindful of those who are in need. Help us to always remember that your grace is freely given and receiving your grace direct us to go and live out grace filled lives. In Jesus name we pray, amen.