Sunday, September 29, 2002
BY WHAT AUTHORITY?
Matthew 21:23-32

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" It's a good question. Jesus had been healing people and forgiving their sins. Earlier in this story from Matthew's gospel, Jesus had entered the temple and driven out those who were buying and selling, who had turned the temple into a marketplace. He overturned the tables of the money changers. So, it is not surprising that the chief priests and elders came to him as he was teaching and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" He was supposed to ask for their permission, and he hadn't done that.

It wasn't the first time that the "authority" issue had come up. When Jesus began his public teaching ministry and began to attract disciples and other followers, we are told by Matthew that the "crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority." (Matthew 7:28-29)

By cleansing the temple and forgiving sins, Jesus was undermining the religious leaders of his day, members of the priestly class who were making a profitable business out of forgiveness. Are you surprised that they responded by attacking him? He was threatening their wealth and privilege. He was subverting their temple monopoly. No wonder they were out to get him.

It's no different today. Power always wants to protect itself. Those in religious leadership are as susceptible as anyone. We don't like people entering the religious arena without proper authorization, without going through the correct procedure to obtain a license. We want to be sure the person has attended the right college and seminary and that all the other credentials are in order.

Most denominations, including the United Church of Christ, have such regulations and with good reason. But as with most things, it's possible to get hung up on the technicalities and not allow for any variance or exceptions. I have been on such examination committees earlier in my ministry. Sometimes I wonder how Jesus would have done as a candidate. Would he have made it through the credentialing committees?

I can imagine the committee's report: "The candidate seems to have trouble with authority and with his own authority. We recommend that he be sent to a counselor to work on these issues before he goes any further in the process. There are many examples of the authority issue in his spiritual journey. He is known to have been impertinent to his elders as far back as age 12, when he argued fine theological points with them in the temple without any consideration for the feelings of his parents. His first sermon in his home congregation made outrageous claims for his ministry. His internship committee report says that he seldom answered questions directly, but responds to questions with questions. Worst of all, he associates with people who have questionable reputations. He has even been known to eat and drink with them."

I have nothing against individuals in the professions — for example, lawyers, physicians, accountants, stock brokers, psychologists, teachers, and clergy — having the proper credentials. Hopefully, it keeps most of the charlatans out.

But there is more to “authority” and its origin and power than simply having the proper credentials. There are those who have all the necessary degrees and credentials but still lack authentic authority.

Last Monday evening, I was privileged to hear Thomas L. Friedman deliver the annual Governor’s Lecture in the Humanities at an event co-sponsored by the Nebraska Humanities Council and the E. N. Thompson Forum on World Issues. It was held at the Lied Center. Because of his wide experience and travels as a newspaper columnist, Mr. Friedman spoke as one who had authority. That was obvious to all of us who were present. His authority came not only from his credentials as a journalist, but also from the fact that he has traveled extensively and lived in the places he writes about.

In his latest book, Longitudes & Attitudes, he writes about his high school journalism teacher, Hattie Steinberg. She taught with authority. She had that mysterious quality that goes beyond the proper credentials. Incidentally, before teaching high school in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, Miss Steinberg taught in Lincoln.

His mention of a high school teacher who taught as one with authority reminded me again of one of my teachers, Miss Reinboldt. I mentioned her before in a previous sermon. She was my high school English teacher, and she also taught Latin. Other than her first and last name, we students knew nothing about her. She was of average size, with gray hair, always fixed in the same way. We guessed her age to be about 60. She had been teaching in our high school as long as anyone could remember. She never seemed to change. She taught as one who had authority. She never had any discipline problems in her classes. Students who were unruly and who would give other teachers trouble were meek as lambs in her class. She always spoke quietly and firmly and never raised her voice. Only one time do I ever remember her being absent. The substitute was a tall, strong man who looked like he could handle anyone, but he never had the authority Miss Reinboldt had. We learned more English in that one year than in any other class.

What was the source of her kind of authentic authority? She had all the right credentials, but so did other teachers who lacked her authority. She had years of experience in teaching, but so did other teachers who did not have her authority. She knew her subject matter thoroughly, but so did other teachers. Why did we respect her so much? Why did we behave? What motivated us to study and learn in her classes? Where did her authority come from? That’s the same question people had about Jesus. There’s a mystery to this kind of authentic authority that some people possess. It cannot be easily understood. You only know it’s there.

Some kinds of authority are easier to explain. There is the authority of office. Some positions in our society carry with them a certain kind of authority no matter who occupies them. We respect the authority of a judge in a courtroom. A police officer in uniform exhibits authority. There is the authority of rank in the military. Sometimes the individual occupying an office may not be respected very much, but the office itself has authority.

Certain positions have authority because of their power — the power to arrest, to impose a sentence, to force someone to do something.

There is also the kind of authority that comes from knowledge, from knowing more about a subject than others, and the authority of having wide experience. Thomas Friedman, in his lecture the other night and in his books, has that kind of authority.

Fame can bring with it a kind of authority that is not always authentic. Some people mistakenly assume that because one is famous, that person is also an authority. In commercials, well-known actresses and actors are made out to be authorities on all kinds of products and issues. Manufacturers, producers, and salespeople seek the endorsement of celebrities. Some of you will remember the line from a television commercial years ago, “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.” Then the actor went on to give us authoritative advice on certain over-the-counter medications as if he were a trusted authority.

Fame and authority are not necessarily synonymous. Miss Reinboldt, my high school English teacher, was never famous in the usual meaning of that term. No one outside that small high school had ever heard of her, but she taught as one who had authority.

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” That’s the question that the religious leaders asked Jesus. We never did ask our high school English teacher that question. If we had, I wonder what she would’ve answered. I’m not sure she could’ve explained where it came from.

Jesus didn’t give a direct answer. He knew that if he had said, “My authority comes directly from God,” that wouldn’t have helped. You can’t convince a person you have authority with words. In this sermon, what I am calling “authentic authority” is most often recognized or felt when you are in that person’s presence.

What Jesus did was ask his critics a question for which they had no answer: “Where did John the Baptist get his authority?” Then he told them a story about a man who had two sons. He said to the first, “Go and work in the vineyard today.” This son said, “No,” but afterward changed his mind and did so. He said to the second son, “Go and work in the vineyard.” This son said, “Yes,” but did not go. “Which of these two sons,” asked Jesus, “did the will of his father?” And they answered, “The first.”

What does this short parable have to do with the “authority” issue? It tells you that you are truly doing the will of God when you do the right thing instead of merely saying the right thing. The truth of your commitment is seen in what you do, not in what you say you are going to do. God is more interested in your actions, in your behaviors, than in your promises. Jesus was not saying that promises are unimportant, but the proof is whether or not you keep the promises. It is when you continually do the right thing that you have authentic authority.

The religious leaders had been critical of Jesus because of his association with sinners and unbelievers. Such people, according to them, did not have the correct theology, and they didn’t obey all the religious rules and rituals. Thus, they could not possibly know the will of God or do it. God would certainly not accept such people. To make matters worse, some of the undesirable people had become followers of John the Baptist and of Jesus. They were able to recognize John’s authority as being from God, and the authority of Jesus as being from God, whereas the supposedly religious people could not.

In this little story, he was telling them that like the first son in the story, even though many of the people who were following him had said “no” to God before, they had changed their minds and now they were responding to his message and were accepting God’s love and doing God’s will.

Remember, the first son said “no” to his dad’s request, but later changed his mind and went. That’s the key phrase in the story: “He changed his mind.” Other translations say, “He

repented.” He had enough courage and conscience to admit to himself and to God that he had made a mistake. The second son said, “Yes,” but didn’t show up. He changed his mind too, but in the wrong way. He said the right thing, but there’s no follow-through. Repentance is never easy. It’s painful to own up to your mistakes, to your bad decisions, but that’s what people of integrity are able to do — admit they are wrong and change the direction of their living. All authentic authority is based on this kind of integrity.

“By what authority are you doing these things?” The answer is, by the authority of a God who is love and loves unconditionally. The good news is that the kind of authority Jesus had is available to anyone. It is based on living a life of the love of God and neighbor. This authority comes from giving your life over to something greater than yourself. People recognize it in you because you treat each person you meet as one who is created in God’s image and as one who God loves unconditionally in the same way as God loves you. There is no greater authority than that. Amen.