

*Matthew 21:23-32  
20 Pentecost / Proper 21 / Year A  
28 September 2008  
Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson*

Last Thursday I had a meeting with Bishop Bud along with the other clergy in the Cape and Islands Deanery. As is our custom when we get together we looked at the gospel for this coming Sunday and we discussed it together. Bud started the conversation with a question echoing the question that the religious leaders asked Jesus; Bud asked us, “As priests, where does your authority come from?” It was interesting to hear some of the responses: from God came one response, from the bishop, came another. Someone else said, no it comes through our ordination and another said, no it really comes through our education and training. There were other responses; one person said that our authority as priests comes through our baptism. That was pretty much in my view the best response. But the whole conversation made me squirm. Most of you know me well enough to know that I am very uncomfortable with questions on clerical authority. I don’t like to claim authority for myself simply because I am a priest. I have always been very clear that your ministries are every bit as important as mine; mine just looks different but it isn’t any more important to the body of Christ and it certainly isn’t any more important in the eyes of God.

So I had to chime in with my own answer to the question. I said, “You know our authority as priests comes from the people, that is, from you all. Authority doesn’t come with the

clerical office, it's earned and it takes time." I continued, "We all have people in our parishes who aren't on the vestry, who don't wear a collar, who aren't deep thinking theologians, but who have been given authority because they have been here, they have been in relationship with the people in the parish for years and years. These folks are the ones that people truly want to hear from and see when they are in the hospital, these are the folks that people want to talk to when the chips are down." // Don't get me wrong, people want to see and talk to me as well. But I can tell you that the conversations that I had with you all during the first couple of years I was here were very different conversations than the ones I am having with you now. Hospital and home visits are very different now than they were in the beginning, and I have to say that it is humbling. It is an enormous privilege for me to have been in relationship with all of you for these past six years.

The religious leaders came to Jesus and they wanted to play politics. Their concern was the preservation of the status quo, the preservation of the institution as it had always been, the preservation of the power and influence they had vested in their offices. Obviously they were threatened and afraid of Jesus and his radical message. When Jesus looks into the eyes of religious people, the ones who have always done the right things, said the right things, and played the right parts and he says, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are

going into the kingdom of God ahead of you,” that’s a radical message and it threatens the status quo. This is a message that breaks down ideologies and says that the Kingdom of God is not as much about right belief as it is about right relationship. The Kingdom is not about what you have in your head or about how well regarded you are by the institution; the Kingdom of God is about what is in your heart, it is about how much love you have to give and receive.

Paul says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Jesus didn’t answer the question about his own authority. The religious leaders really had no interest in the truth anyway; the truth was far too scary for them to deal with. Their only interest was to remove the threat. Sitting here today, however, we know where Jesus’ authority came from. It was given to him by God the Father certainly, that is what we profess,

but perhaps even more importantly, it was given to him by the people, the masses, the people whom Jesus loved, the ones who loved him in return.

The discussion of church authority is one that for me is very uncomfortable. I suppose we need a hierarchy in the church in order to help resolve the disputes that come along from time to time; but real authority for ministry, no matter if it is ordained or lay ministry, comes from those whom we serve. It comes when we walk in other people's shoes, when we are truly present with others in their moments of greatest joy and deepest sadness. Real authority comes when we love without condition and without concern for what it costs. That is the distinction that Jesus was trying to draw as he spoke in a parable to the frightened religious leaders who were trying to trick him and that is the central message Paul was trying to convey to the Christian people in Philippi. This is the kind of community that we are welcoming little Brody and young Shanya into this morning through the sacrament of Holy Baptism; a humble community that reaches out in love to them and to one another.

In Jesus Name; Amen.