

In August and September a few of us from here along with members of the neighboring Lutheran churches met for a study on Civic Life and Faith to discuss and provide feedback to the ELCA task force that is writing a social statement about our roles and responsibilities as people of faith in a democracy, specifically in this country where we are guaranteed freedom of and freedom from religion. In those six weeks we did not solve all of our nation's problems, but we did spend considerable time lamenting the often nasty partisan division that affects so many areas of our lives from school boards to healthcare to the Thanksgiving dinner table. And although our ratings-driven 24 hour news networks definitely feed that division, the first thing I thought when I read today's gospel was that there is nothing new under the sun: even 2,000 years ago leaders were making decisions based on what was politically expedient instead of what was right or good or helpful for the people around them.

In Matthew's gospel we have skipped ahead, or maybe you want to think of it as skipping backwards in our liturgical year, to Holy Week: this scene happens between Jesus' Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem and his arrest. He has just turned over tables in the Temple and cursed a fruitless fig tree. The chief priests and elders want to know by whose authority Jesus is causing all of this upheaval. As Christians, it is tempting for us to see the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, the elders, and everybody who argues with Jesus in the gospels as the bad guys because, well, we know Jesus is the hero of the story, and those people shouldn't be antagonizing him. But in context, those priests and elders are doing exactly what they are supposed to be doing, and exactly what we are called to do in similar circumstances: they hear what sounds like new interpretation and they try to figure out whether it's a faithful perspective. If I say something up here on a Sunday morning that sounds like it's coming from left field, I would hope you would wrestle with it.

It has been said of Christianity that we turn to scripture to try to end theological discussions, while in Judaism it's the opposite: scripture begins the discussion. I'll let you infer which of those orders of events I think leads to a richer understanding of the Divine. But the questioning back and forth between Jesus and the religious leaders was just their normal approach to learning. Their question about Jesus' authority is appropriate, because typically someone who was teaching the way Jesus was would identify themselves by the teacher they had studied under; that's what

disciples were—students of a teacher, who themselves once had a teacher, and so on back through the generations. The elders want to know whose tradition Jesus is claiming to represent. But Jesus hardly ever answers a question directly; instead, he very often answers with another question. So he asks these priests and elders about the authority of John the Baptist's ministry.

Their answer is what made me think of so many of our modern politicians. *If we say from heaven, we'll be asked why we didn't believe him, but we can't say from human origin, because the crowds believe John was a prophet.* They don't try to give an honest answer; they don't even seem to have privately formed an opinion about what the honest answer is. They're only interested in what they think the crowd wants to hear, because their power comes from crowd support, and they don't want to lose that. They care less about whether John's ministry was faithful than what will happen to them if they express an unpopular opinion about it; and although a lively discussion with Jesus would lead them to a deeper understanding of God, they don't want an honest answer from him so much as they want to maintain their own status and authority at any cost. In all the years since then, we as the church haven't learned to do much better; now that we are the chief priests and elders—that is, the insiders of our religion—we also get caught up in protecting our own institutional power and privilege in the name of preserving tradition and doctrine, instead of learning something new or recognizing the work that God is doing *outside of* what we've come to expect—and what we believe we can control.

Jesus' parable provides a litmus test for recognizing faithfulness. The brother who says he won't work but ends up working anyway is the one who does the will of the Father, not the one who says he'll work but doesn't. What we say about ourselves is not the sign of our discipleship; it's what we do that makes the difference. And what Jesus himself did and then commanded us to do was feed and heal and wash feet and forgive enemies and love neighbors and do to the least of these what we would do to him. When we see other people doing that, we don't need to ask whether or not they are people of faith: we can see the fruit their faith is bearing. And when people see us helping and healing, searching and serving, loving kindness and doing justice, they can see that we are walking humbly with God. We aren't called just to look good, we're called to do good. May we answer that call with lives that point to Jesus, so that nobody even needs to ask, *By whose authority are you doing these things?* because we are so clearly living out the love of God.