

Jonathan Mark
FMC Reedley
Matthew 21:1-11
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By What Authority

Jesus is coming into Jerusalem with the authority of a prophetic sign and a large crowd bowing down to him, asking him to save them. It appears that Jesus is on top of the world, but in reality, this triumphal entry is a confrontation with the Romans and their priestly lackeys.

As I read this chapter of Matthew, I got fixated on the question that the chief priests and elders ask Jesus a few verses later “by what authority are you doing these things.” The topic of authority and religion has been a tricky one for me. By authority, I’m not talking about disobedience. I’m asking, whose voice is most important to you? For example, when I was a child, my parent’s voice was most important; I thought they knew everything and I could always come to them. Though when I grew older and started worrying about girls and being cool, I increasingly turned to my peers for guidance. This confusion about which authority I should listen to makes being a teenager confusing.

Okay, but let me get nerdy with you. Mennonites and Anabaptism were forged out of a crisis of authority. The reformation in the 16th century happened for a myriad of reasons, but one crystalizing conflict was “what was the most authoritative source of guidance.” Was it tradition or the scriptures? Our spiritual ancestors said that scripture alone should be the authority. So when they only saw adult baptisms in the scriptures, they decided to get re-baptized and not baptize their infants.

I wonder if we are in a similar crisis of authority in the church. Some say that if a law or command shows up in one verse, then that’s the end of the debate. This is because obedience is so important to one’s relationship with God. An Anabaptist perspective would say we should prioritize the teachings of Jesus over Paul and the Old Testament. Faithful Christians also listen to the voices of great teachers or science or one’s lived experience, not to override scripture, but to read scripture through these different voices of authority, such as tempering your friend’s idea of going to a party with your parent’s advice to refrain from alcohol.

So as I read Jesus’s triumphal entry, I hear him ask me. Whose authority are you going to follow? Will you follow the Emperor, the religious leaders, and the money changers in the temple? Are you going to follow those who chose laws over people? Jesus opposes religious leaders who read the same Hebrew Bible but disagree about how to interpret those scriptures. A place that followers of God have been in so many times. Jesus is the stone the builders rejected. The people beloved John the Baptist, but King Herod

chopped off his head. Is it inevitable that when people draw from different authorities, they split apart? I try not to let that get me down. Instead, I want to focus on a crowd of people spreading their cloaks, crying hosanna, save us descendant of David!

What kind of ethics comes from the authorities you treasure? Is the way you read the Bible leading you to follow Jesus on this triumphal entry, or is there a great crowd excitedly welcoming you in? Where are the tax collectors and prostitutes that are already following the way of Jesus, and we are just catching up? But the crowd is just as fickle as an authority, since a few days later, a different crowd will cry “crucify him.”

What I’m trying to say is that the authorities we follow have real-world consequences. Even as I stand here, with all the power and privilege of this pulpit, I feel like an outsider. I think about my mother, whose church family is her family, even though she is divorced. I think of my friends from mixed-race parents, remembering how their parents’ churches and families initially responded to their marriage. I think of my gay and trans pastor friends serving the church right now despite all the pain and denial of their call they had to go through to get there. I think about all those people in the crowd, crying out for Jesus to be the authority.

Still, I promise you this, no matter how you read the scriptures or which wise teachers you read, I pray we will walk together in love, learning why Jesus means so much to us.