

September 24, 2017: Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 21:23-32: Words and Actions

I really like my job. I would say I love my job, but I think love is too strong a word to use in reference to a thing. So if I say I really like something, it means something. Sure, like any job, it's not without its challenges. I have good days and bad days, but overall, I feel very fortunate to get to do what I do, and do it here, with you. I love you guys. I don't say it enough.

With that being said, I don't know if I can say this is my best job ever. If I were to rank all the jobs I have ever had, this one would have some competition for first place. I'm not referring to another job as a pastor. I'm referring to one of the first real jobs I ever had. By real I'm talking about actually getting a paycheck, with taxes being taken out. I was seventeen years old. I worked in the car audio department at Best Buy.

I love, or I should say, really like, car audio. The big speakers, the amplifiers, the fancy head units with all the completely pointless features, like remotes. Who needs a remote for their car stereo? I was that kid whose parents could hear him coming home a good half-mile before he got there. Suddenly the earring doesn't seem all that bad. I hope you have not lost all respect for me. Now is probably not the best time to tell you about the tattoo.

For a seventeen-year-old kid who was in to this stuff, getting this job was a dream come true. In the particular store where I worked, we had a life-size replica of a Dodge Viper with an amazing sound system. People could sit in it, turn the system on, and choose which speakers they wanted to hear, and of course turn the volume way up. You could hear it throughout the entire store. I also got an incredible employee discount. So incredible, that I actually brought home very little money. Probably the best part thought was the way people thought I was the authority on all things car audio.

The thing is, I really wasn't. I did know more than the average person, but I was far from an expert. What I had was a blue, collared shirt with the best buy logo, a best buy name badge, access to a computer program that told you exactly what size speakers would fit in any given car, and the ability to read the little informational signs underneath each item. But a lot of people thought I knew everything there was to know about car stereos. And they spent a lot of money based on my recommendations.

Whenever we want to know the truth about something, we understand the importance of seeking out someone who is an authority on that subject. But it's not always easy to know who that person might be. Because it's possible for someone to look the part, even to know all the right things to say, but have no idea what they are talking about, or at least not know nearly as much as they pretend to.

This issue of authority is front and center in our Scripture reading for today. Jesus had been challenging the recognized authorities on God, the so-called experts. This conversation came on the heels of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, when the crowds welcomed him as the coming Messiah and he made no attempt to silence them. Shortly after his arrival he made his way into the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers and throwing out those who were profiting from the sale of overpriced sacrificial animals. He then turned his attention to the curing the blind and the lame. And finally, we read of him cursing a fig tree that bore no fruit, which the chief priests and elders understood to be a critique of their own spirituality.

We understand what they were getting at when they asked Jesus, "Who made you the expert? What gives you the authority to speak and act for God? Why should anybody take what you are saying as the

gospel truth?” Like many of their questions, it was designed to entrap Jesus. Authority is a sensitive subject. Authority is linked to power. And if he claimed to be the ultimate authority on God, it would put him in the crosshairs of the Roman Empire. Jesus promised to answer their question, if they would first answer his, “Was John the Baptist acting under God’s orders, or his own?”

This was also a question about authority. Jesus was trying to get them to publically say whether or not they believed John was an authority on God, if what he said and did was true, or just something he made up. Now they were on the hot seat. If they said he was not, they would be in big trouble with the many who believed he was. If they said he was, they would obligate themselves to believe what he said, including what he said about Jesus, that he was the Messiah. So they had no choice but to refuse to answer. Jesus then went on to tell a parable to provide some insight into what kind of person does have the authority to speak for God. It wasn’t who the chief priests and elders expected.

The parable is the story of a man and his two sons. He told the first son to go and work in the vineyard on a certain day. His initial response was to refuse, but later he changed his mind and went. The father said the same thing to the second son, whose initial response was to say that he would, but he didn’t. Jesus then asked the chief priest and elders to identify which of the two sons did the will of his Father. The answer was obvious; it was the first. His point then was that actions speak louder than words. It echoes words he said earlier in Matthew’s gospel...

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

The chief priests and elders certainly looked the part as those who had the authority to speak for God. They knew all the right things to say, but their actions were not consistent with their words. Jesus practiced what he preached. As did John the Baptist. He was willing to confront people about their sin, and call them to repentance, even people in high places. And it ultimately cost him his life. And the worst kinds of people, tax collectors and prostitutes, listened to what God had to say through John. They were baptized and repented of their sins. Their lives were transformed. They didn’t know the words to say, but their actions spoke volumes. This was a hard truth for the religious leaders to accept. Jesus, John the Baptist, and plain, ordinary sinners had more authority to speak for God than they did.

This story had implications for the early Church. In those formative years, as the Church was trying to understand what their message should be, and what kinds of things should define them, there were many people claiming to speak for God. This story helped them identify which voices they should listen to, and which ones they should ignore. It taught them that saying the right things was not enough, that actions were more important.

This story has implications for us too. It invites us to consider who has the authority to speak God’s truth into our lives. They should practice what they preach. For more guidance we can go back to that story of Jesus cursing the fig tree that was not bearing fruit. If a person is not bearing fruit in their life, they should not be an authority in our life. This doesn’t mean they have to be perfect. That would exclude everyone. But their life should show evidence of growing in the grace of God, and the transformation brought about through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We could also ask ourselves whether or not our church is in a position of authority? Should people listen to us when we speak for God, because we do, whether we want to or not. We represent God in our community. Are the things we say consistent with the words of Jesus? Are our actions consistent with

our words? Are people encountering Jesus in this place. Are lives being transformed? Are people growing in grace?

Finally, are you in a position of authority to speak for God? Should people listen to you? This is probably the toughest question for us to answer. Not because it's hard for us to know the answer, but hard to accept what our answer might be. Do you have a right to speak for God? Are your actions consistent with the words you speak? Is your life a reflection of the God you say you believe in? As I said, these are difficult questions.

You can't just look at the way you are living your life and decide the best thing for you to do is keep your mouth shut. That's not an option. You can't really keep your relationship with God a secret. You can avoid doing things like putting one of those Christian fish on your car, and wearing Christian t-shirts, but that can only go so far. If you claim to be a Christian, you represent God in the world and to the world, for good or bad. Your words and actions speak for Him whether you want to or not.

You can't just say that speaking for God is only the job of religious leaders. There is a double standard in many churches when it comes to what people expect out of church leadership and what they expect out of themselves. God doesn't recognize the distinction. The Bible talks about how teachers will be held accountable for the things they say, but in terms of being a follower of Jesus, the same call to be transformed into the image of Christ that applies to me, applies to every single one of you.

It can all seem a little overwhelming at times. This thing called the Bible. But it is so important to understand that in order to speak truthfully for God, you don't have to be perfect. None of us are. We all make mistakes. We all have sin in our lives, not necessarily in the sense that we are out there robbing banks and murdering people and things like that, but in the sense that we all fall short of the person God created us to be.

While we don't need to be perfect, we do need to be honest. When we do sin, or become aware of some area where we fall short, we need to confess, repent, and move on with a resolve, that, with God's help, we will not do it again.

And we need to be humble. When we sin against someone, we need to go to them and ask for their forgiveness. The difference between a follower of Jesus and an unbeliever is not that we don't sometimes get angry, or upset, or frustrated and fly off the handle and maybe take it out on someone. Doing those things makes us human. The difference between a follower of Jesus and anybody else is that the follower of Jesus goes to that person and says, "I'm sorry. Would you please forgive me?"

So it's not perfection that's needed, but only that our heart, our mind, our will, are bent toward God. At the end of the day, we want to do what God asks of us. We want to be the person he created us to be. So we do what we must do for God to do his work in us. We read his Word. We spend time in prayer. We spend time in his presence and with our fellow believers. We take time to worship and give thanks. If we are doing those things we can sleep well at night, and leave the rest up to him.