Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 21—Year A
Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 78:1-4,12-16
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

There is so much good stuff in the lessons today—I don't know where to even begin! So, we'll start with the **gospel**.

And to do that, I've got to set the stage. It's **the last week of Jesus' life**. He's had **that glorious, palm-branch-waving procession down the Mount of Olives**. He's **gone into the temple and chased out the money-changers**, and with newfound access to the temple that wasn't dependent on being able to pay your way in there, **the blind and lame came** in droves. And **Jesus healed them**, and **they praised him**, and that **made the chief priests and the scribes *indignant***. But you can see that the strain is starting to get to **Jesus**, and he takes his frustration out on **a fig tree**. In fairness, he *was* hungry, and the tree ***didn't*** **have any fruit on it**, but **he cursed it so that it withered and died**—he may have overshot that just a bit.

All of this is the *background* to today's passage.

Now, **Jesus is back in the temple, and he's teaching, and the chief priests and the elders come up to him while he's teaching** and ask, **"By what authority, by what ἐξουσίᾳ, by what *power of influence and privilege*, are you doing these things, and who gave you this *influence and privilege*?"** ***Influence and privilege***—yep, that's what the word we translate as **"authority"** means in the greek.

Jesus answers their question with a question of his own. **"Tell you what,"** he says, **"I'll ask you a question, and if you can answer it, I'll tell you by what authority, by what ἐξουσίᾳ, I do these things. The baptism of John, where did it come from? What was its source? Was it from heaven, *or* was it of human origin?"**

Oh, that sent them into a tailspin, and they began **reasoning with one another, deliberating—"If we say, 'From heaven,' then he's going to ask us, 'Then why didn't you trust him?' But if we say, 'It's of human origin,' then we fear the people because they all regard John as a prophet. So, they answered Jesus, "We don't know,' and Jesus answered them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority, by what *influence and privilege*, I do these things."**

But as is often the case, Jesus didn't stop there; *he went on to tell a story.*

"What do you think? You're smart people in the business of making judgments. **A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went…"** But the greek here is tricky. It's often translated as *"repented,"* which often gets translated as *"to change one's mind,"* but it's more like ***"he extended his care after the fact."***

"The father went to the second and said the same; and that son answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the *tax collectors* and the *prostitutes* are going into the kingdom of God *ahead of you*. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not *trust* him, but the *tax collectors* and the *prostitutes trusted* him; and even after you *saw* it, you *did not extend your care and trust him.*"

The **chief priests and elders** are interested in the question of ***influence and privilege***—who has it, how they got it and who gave it to them. **Jesus** is interested in ***how one extends their care, even if it's after the fact***; **Jesus** is interested in ***how what we <u>see</u> pushes us to rethink and expand the limits of our care***; and **Jesus** is much more interested in ***the capacity to trust***, to simply ***trust***, than he is in ***influence and privilege.***

But this is because ***Jesus' relationship to power*** turns power on its head.

Philippians 2. What a passage! **Paul** gets some things wrong, but he gets this one very, very right.

He starts by laying out a foundation**—"Therefore, if there is any *encouragement*, any *consolation that gives comfort or refreshment*, in Christ, if there is any *persuasive address of love*, if there is any *communion with the Spirit*, if there is any *tender mercy*, any *heart in which mercy resides*, any *heart of compassion*, like *compassion* that reaches in and comes out of *the depths of your bowels*"** (like seriously, the greek here for **"tender mercy"** and **"compassion"** both refer to ***bowels, intestines***, and the Hebrew people thought that ***these places were the seat of the tenderer affections, especially kindness, benevolence, and compassion)***, **"if there is any of this, THEN,"** Paul says, **"make my joy complete to this end; be of the *same mind*, the *same understanding, holding* to the *same love*, of *one mind*, like really *one mind*, like really, this is important that you be of *one mind* and *direct your mind* to *being of one mind*."** In these phrases in greek, this word for **"mind"** and **"being of one mind"** just keep repeating to make sure we *really* get how *important* this is.

Then Paul shifts to show what **this does NOT look like**, and this is where it gets fascinating for us.

The translation reads, **"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves."** That sounds churchy enough, and we could slide right by it. But listen to the greek. "**Do nothing from *electioneering for office*, from *partisanship*, from *fractiousness*, or *vainglory*,"** literally ***'glorying without reason, being eager for empty glory.'*** Especially fascinating when we place ***this kind of glory*** over against ***the glory that comes from God.***

"But with humility of mind"—we're back to this **mind** thing, and here, we're counseled to ***keep it close to the ground, low, not too lofty***—the greek dictionary talks about ***having a deep sense of one's (moral) littleness***. **"With humility of mind, *lead* by *considering and holding one another above yourselves*."** This sounds so very close to that **"extending care"** that **Jesus** was talking about.

"Do not fix your eyes upon, do not look out only for yourselves, but also [look out] for each and every other.

"Have *this mind* in yourselves that is *also in Christ Jesus* who though he was in the form of God *did not regard equality* with God as a thing to be *seized, plundered*,"—like ***in a robbery***—**"but *emptied* himself, taking the form of *one who serves*, one who is *devoted to another to the disregard of his own interests*"**—the very *opposite* of ***looking out for one's own interests*—"being made in the form of a human being.**

"And having inhabited every aspect of that existence as a human being, he brought himself even *lower*, even *closer to the ground* where we humans with feet of clay live our lives, **by being obedient"**—literally ***"giving ear to," listening*** to and following his life and call**—"even as far as death, even death on a cross.**

"**For this reason also, God has lifted him up"**—the *opposite* of that ***going down low***—**"and freely given him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus *every* knee will bend, will bow in honor"**—hmmm—**"in heaven, on earth, and under the earth—*every* knee, *everywhere*. And *every* tongue confess that Jesus is Lord,"**—as in *"we're not Lord"*—**"to the glory of God the Father"**—as in *"not to our own glory."*

Paul continues with this command, **"Work out your own *salvation*, your own *healing*, your own *wholeness* with *fear* and *trembling*"**—the kind of **fear** that is tinged with ***reverence***, and this **trembling** is more like ***anxiety***, ***the anxiety that you feel when don't trust that you're capable of all that's being asked of you but you fervently do your utmost to fulfill your duty anyway***. Then, Paul reminds us that *we can keep at it* because **God is at work in us *both* to *will*, to *set our intentions and desires*, and to *work* for God's *kind purpose*.**

So, **the elders and chief priests** are concerned with the **power** of ***influence and privilege***, and **Jesus** is concerned with the **power** that ***comes from below***, the **power** that comes from ***emptying oneself of that empty glory*** that is ***only concerned with one's own interests***, ***emptying oneself*** of all that ***grasping and seizing kind of power***, ***emptying oneself*** of all that ***jockeying for position*** and ***rigging the system*** and ***playing the partisan divides*** and ***sowing fractious seeds***.

Jesus WANTS NONE OF THAT, *opting instead* for ***communion with all of humanity*** and ***carving out space in his being*** so that he can ***listen*** to and ***hear God's call***, even when that call will ***cost him everything***.

Jesus makes it his mission to keep on ***emptying himself*** of all those things that the world says we must have, SO THAT he is free to keep on ***extending care*** past all those places where we would draw the line on divine love and care, and in ***letting that love grow ever wider and ever deeper***, **God lifts him, fills him full of divine glory**, and in that lifting up of Jesus, God tells US, *"This is what **true power looks like**; following this **Lord** will keep you **close to the ground**, **lead you deeper in love**, ensure that your **bowels remember** what it is to feel **compassion** and **mercy**, keep **your eye firmly fixed on care of the other**. Live in this place, and you'll discover a **glory** that is so much richer than the **glory** this world is jockeying for. Live in this place, and you'll*

*understand what **true reverence** means. Then, **firmly rooted in this sense of power**, GET TO **WORK**. Be diligent in **working out your healing and wholeness**, even when it leaves you **shaking in your boots**, and **you don't think you're up to the task,**even when it **costs you everything**. It's **not just you doing the work**, but **I, God, am working in you and through you** to **seed** this **divine kindness** throughout the world."*

So, the question for us today is *not* whether we want **power**, but *what kind of **power** do we seek*?

Do we desire the **power** that comes from ***influence or privilege***? Or, do we desire the **power** that comes when we ***yield and seek the mind of Christ which is grounded in love and compassion and mercy***?

Do we ***look out only for ourselves***? Or, do we ***extend our care toward the other, even if we miss it the first time round and get to it after the fact***?

Do we ***grasp after empty glory***, ***seizing*** things left and right *to fill that empty hole in our soul* because it *terrifies* us? Or, do we understand that ***emptying ourselves*** is ***the spiritual practice to which we are called if we follow Jesus as our Lord***, and that *that **emptiness*** is ***holy and sacred ground that God can then fill with God's tender mercy and compassion and care***, and that it is ***these qualities*** that in fact ***radiate glory***?

Would we rather argue over ***who's got authority, and how they got it, and whether or not it's legitimate***? Or, are we willing to get on with ***working out our salvation with fear and trembling, stepping forward,*** even when we are ***quaking in our boots feeling most inadequate to the task?***

IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT POWER, and until we understand **how Jesus embodies power, and have the *same mind* as him**, we'll keep missing **the kind and merciful kingdom that God so yearns to build**.

Risk the emptying, and ***trust*** that ***what will be given you will far exceed*** anything the world is trying to sell you, or you yourself could dare to imagine. Amen.

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