

Message: "Theological Empiricism"

Scripture: Matthew 21:23-32

²³When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹Which 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. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Sometimes in my role as pastor, I get questions that really bother me. For instance, every now and then someone asks me a question like, "Where in the Bible is the story of the talking donkey?" I have a pretty good idea it's in a book somewhere between Genesis and Revelation, but that's about as far as I can narrow things down. Other questions that bother me are ones like "If God is all good, and God created all things, and God is all powerful, why is there suffering?" I don't have a good answer for that one. Other types of troublesome questions range from the curiously mundane, such as "Who did Adam and Eve's children marry?" to questions that are maddeningly intricate, such as "Was the metaphysical temporality of Christ present in the establishment of the eucharist in rigidly corporeal, consubstantial, transubstantial, or non-substantial essence?" Such questions tend to give me a headache.

But there are many other types of questions that tend to give me a heartache - and this is the type of question Jesus receives from the chief priests and elders in our scripture lesson today. They ask him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" It is a question that involves the weaponization of responsibility for the purpose of punitive response. In other words, once accountability is determined, the dogs can be unleashed. The heartache comes from realizing the insidious nature of some people, who use questions to attack.

I remember a time years ago when I received a hostile phone call from one of my parishioners. She was the leader of several committees in our church; she and her husband had been life-long members of this one particular congregation;

and she was -- how shall we say it? - loudly opinionated. Well, in this phone call, she was sharing her loud opinion of my poor leadership regarding the cleanliness of our church. She explained that she had been over to the church earlier, and noticed, and I quote, "that the youth group had trashed the kitchen." Oh dear, I thought - but then, I wondered what she was talking about. You see, I was the leader of the youth group; I had led the group the night before, even providing one of my famous pastor John hot dog suppers, complete with potato chips and soda pop and three flavors of ketchup; and as I had been pastor of five different churches by that time in my pastorate, I had learned that there is an eleventh commandment solely meant for youth pastors - namely, THOU SHALT NEVER LEAVE A MESS FROM ANY YOUTH GROUP MEETING - along with its corollary point - ESPECIALLY DON'T LEAVE A MESSY KITCHEN. I had learned that eleventh commandment and its corollary pretty well. I was sure I had cleaned up after the youth members left - but I didn't mention that to this angry voice on the telephone. You see, there is a 12th commandment pastors of any experience usually learn, and it is the commandment to NEVER INTERRUPT AN ANGRY PARISHIONER WHEN THEY ARE CRITICIZING THE PASTOR. That's a hard commandment to keep, I must confess, but I have found it a very important one to follow. For so very often, when the anger is outsized in comparison to the issue at hand, there are other factors at play—and it can be a game changer when some of those factors are finally revealed.

In any event, here was my parishioner blasting away at how terrible the youth were and how terrible the mess was when she let me have it - she gave me THE question, the one Jesus received in our passage today and the one which makes pastor's hearts skip a beat. "WHO'S RESPONSIBLE?" she asked. "WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR THE YOUTH GROUP? WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR THAT MESS?" I gulped hard, for, of course, I was the youth leader. She knew this as well, so the question was disingenuous - that is, she already knew the answer to the question. But what do you do when asked such a pointed question? Yes, it was me, I said to her; I let her know I was responsible. I told her I was sorry that she had to clean up the mess - and then she surprised me. She said "Oh, I didn't clean it up; I left it just as I found it; I wanted you to see for yourself." I let her know I would go right over and take care of the mess, to which she replied, and I quote, "Hmph!"

Well, I went over to the church to clean up the mess, getting a bucket and mop and trash basket for the task - but when I entered the kitchen, I found it

pristine; it was as I had left it, as the youth group had left it, with everything put back in its place and counters wiped down. I did find one half-empty soda can at the end of one counter, but that was it - and I thought that someone else from the church had beat me to the cleaning job.

I went home and gave the angry parishioner a call to let her know the mess was all taken care of, mentioning that when I went over I discovered that someone else must have cleaned up before, because all I found was one half empty soda can on the counter. Just to make sure, I asked her a question: "What was the mess like when you saw it?" She said "That was it! The soda can on the counter." I asked her if anything else was messed up; she said no. I was stunned. This parishioner had shouted at me on the phone about one half empty soda can left on the counter.

That's when I let her have it, with both barrels, a full salvo of "ARE YOU KIDDING ME?" No, I didn't do that, even though a part of me felt like doing that. I dropped my defensiveness and dedicated myself to trying to understand her better. You see, I realized her angry question was a cover for something else. She had asked me "Who's responsible?" not really to identify any culprit or acknowledge any significant mess; her question reflected a surface irritation covering much deeper stressors in her life, stressors including her husband who was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, stressors such as a complicated and painful family history, and stressors like a church who largely tried to steer clear of her because of her tendency to have outbursts - stressors I knew a little about, but was soon to learn much more.

Very often I find this to be the case with people I pastor - that the questions they ask or the challenges they introduce can be covers for deeper things. With my parishioner I realized that no one had been listening to her; at least that's how she felt. And I had not understood just how desperate she was until that moment. That I listened to her and acted in response to her concern as best as I could changed our relationship significantly; I was no longer the pastor causing her problems, but the pastor who tried to listen and respond. She never called me again with an angry voice - and more importantly, she began talking with me about those stressors that were overwhelming her life.

This experience and many others like it taught me something Jesus is trying to make clear in this passage, and it is this: UNDERSTANDING WHAT'S BEHIND A QUESTION CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE. Jesus is dealing with a group of people whose question is likewise a cover for deeper things - but these

deeper things are things of vengeance and disempowerment. It is important to ground today's scripture contextually, for this scene takes place one day after Jesus had cleansed the temple, overturning tables and driving out the moneylenders and those making a profit from the selling of items for sacrifice; one can sense the rage in Jesus at the abuse of the temple, matched perhaps only by the rage of the chief priests and elders over having their lucrative business ventures majorly disrupted. If he hadn't done so before, Jesus had now created very committed enemies in these leaders; their motivation must have been strong to exact revenge. This adds a sharp edge to their questioning; it is pretty obvious that they have no real interest in hearing what Jesus has to say. They're not looking for answers; they're looking for ammunition.

Jesus understood this and dealt with it as such cover questions can only be dealt with - he asked them a counter question. ²⁵"Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" They revealed much in their deliberation, mainly that their original question was unimportant to them overall; their interest was not in answers, but in power -- namely how to retain their own power over the people that Jesus now influenced. Jesus saw this clearly and knew it was a game he didn't want to play - and counter questions have a tendency to bring such game playing to an end.

There are a lot of cover questions being asked these days, aren't there? Questions that really aren't interested in an honest answer but in gaining ammunition to use against adversaries; questions that are disingenuous, asked in order to distract and deflect attention away from unwanted examinations; questions that are hoped to confuse and befuddle rather than lead to meaningful exchange. Counter questions are very appropriate when such games are being played; counter questions help to re-introduce integrity into the discernment stream, to re-align focus upon what's really going on below the surface; counter questions recognize that truth is served only when questioning seeks honest, empirical answers separate from human agendas.

And you can't get more honest than reality as it really is. This is the point Jesus makes in sharing the parable of the two sons, one who says he'll do what his father asks but then fails to do it, and the other who says he won't do what his father asks but then reconsiders and fulfills the request. It's one of the most basic understandings our faith promotes, that a spoken faith means nothing if the words do not lead to actual living; it's also one of the most basic tenets of common

sense - that what one actually does is always more important than what one says one will do.

And there we have been given one of the most important counter questions of all - namely, in the face of anything someone says, to ask "what is actually done?" Words are cheap and easily crafted - but when those words identify actions intended or behavior promised, their integrity depends completely on such matters coming to pass in real time, in real space. We live in times when words proclaim the end to wars, lower gasoline prices, Epstein files being released, no-cost ballrooms, \$5000 checks, 1500 percent cost reduction on pharmaceuticals, and a host of other promises and predictions that have completely failed the test of actuality. Counter questions are essential to keep drawing such inconsistencies to light; counter questions are mandated by any who recognize demonstrable truths have no substitute.

It's a basic understanding that can be said in so many ways, but it boils down to this: If you want to know what someone really believes, don't ask them - watch them. See what they do, how they behave, where they go. Hear what the pastor and priest and pope all say; but check their words by their actions, how they follow Jesus or fail to do so. Likewise, hear what the politician and president and candidates say; but check their words by what they actually do. Many such figures have abysmal track records, where their words say one thing but their actions say the opposite; they require counter questions to keep those records in view. But then, before all of these, listen to your own voice, speaking about what you believe and what's important in your life; check to see that your words move beyond speech or thought. This is the basic premise of faith - that we live what we believe. May we keep in mind that all of us will be known to God by what we do more than what we say -- And each of us are really only known to each other in the same way.