

A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

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Luke 1945-20:8

This past Saturday, I cleaned out my garage. This was a task that was long overdue. I'm not saying that the garage was messy, but I kept getting phone calls from the people who make the TV show "Hoarders."

Cleaning out the garage is a straightforward job. You carry everything out into the driveway. Then you sweep/mop/vacuum. And you put everything back into the garage, but where it belongs. In the process you cull out the stuff that you don't need. At the end of the day (and it took all day), the garage looked great.

The upside of having this clean garage was that immediately I tackled two small house projects that I had been putting off for far too long. With my workbench now completely clear and usable, I was able to complete these two projects literally in a matter of minutes.

Our reading from Luke begins with Jesus doing something similar, except instead of cleaning out his garage, he cleans out the temple.

Jesus is Jerusalem. After 10 chapters of traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus has finally arrived at the capital city. Last week, we looked at how he rode into Jerusalem on the donkey while his followers placed their cloaks on the road in front of him.

Once in the city, the first thing he does is to go into the temple. There, as Luke explains, Jesus *began to drive out those who were selling things there*. Luke does not tell us what was being sold in the temple. Possibly, what was being sold was money. People would come to the temple in order to pay their temple tax. The tax had to be paid with a certain currency. A pilgrim from out of town might not have that particular currency. Money changers in the temple acted just like the currency exchange you see at the airport selling you the money that you need.

Or maybe what was being sold was animals for sacrifices. Again, a pilgrim from out of town would need doves, or pigeons, or a lamb, or a goat to offer as their sacrifice at the temple. It would certainly be convenient to have the animals available in the temple. Of course, you can be sure there was a mark-up in price. But that would be the price of convenience. [Compare this to other gospels?]

As Jesus drives these vendors out of the temple, he quotes scripture saying, *It is written, "My house shall be a house of prayer."* This quotation is from the prophet

Isaiah.¹ Jesus follows this with a quote from Jeremiah saying, *but you have made it a den of robbers.*²

Why did Jesus instigate this ruckus in the temple? Part of it anyway is the same reason as why I cleaned out my garage—in order to do work, to best use that place for its intended purpose. Immediately after he drives out the vendors, Luke tells us, Jesus taught in the temple. Much of the next couple of chapters will center on Jesus teaching in the temple. If he intended to teach, to do work, then he needed to clear out the junk and distractions. The purpose of the temple is to serve as a place where people may present themselves to the Lord, not be a marketplace.

The consequences of Jesus' actions are swift. Luke tells us that the chief priest, the scribes, and the leaders of the people *kept looking for a way to kill him*. However, they were thwarted by Jesus' popularity among the people. We know, that in time, they will be successful.

Jesus' impending death is an undercurrent in Luke's gospel that has been growing stronger and stronger. It started back in chapter 2 when Jesus was an infant. His parents took him to the temple to be blessed and the old man named Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and said that this child would be *a sign that will be opposed* (2:34). In chapter 4, in Nazareth, Jesus' preaching incites the people to rise up and try to kill him. In chapter 9, Jesus foretells his death when he explains to his disciples that, *The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised* (9:22). He will repeat this warning to them two more times.

The Pharisees had on occasion opposed Jesus on theological issues, but they never threatened him. This is the first time those in power have sought to harm Jesus. Luke has warned us this would happen. But why did the chief priests want to kill Jesus?

This is a question that Luke will continue to pose through the end of this gospel. You can be sure that Luke's congregation had asked him, "If Jesus was so good, why was he killed?" From this point on, Luke will be building his explanation for Jesus' execution. When Jesus is brought to Pilate, the accusations against went like this, *We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.* (23:2)—in other words, upsetting the status quo, undermining the government, and claiming to be king. When Pilate asks Jesus if he indeed is King of the Jews, Jesus answers, *you say so*.

I believe the reason that the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people wanted to kill Jesus was an issue of turf. The temple was their turf and Jesus was encroaching on it. When Jesus drove out the vendors, he upset a delicate

¹ *for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people* (Isa 56:7).

² *Has this house...become a den of robbers?* (Jeremiah 7:11).

balance. You can be sure that the vendors did not stay away very long. They probably went straight to the chief priests to complain. No doubt there was an economic relationship between them and the temple. The priests knew that having the vendors in the temple wasn't the best thing, but it was convenient, it was profitable, and they probably justified it by saying that they were protecting the out-of-towners from unscrupulous merchants in the marketplace. The last thing they want is for Jesus to bring attention to this arrangement. Killing Jesus would be the most expedient solution to their problem. Only Jesus' popularity stopped them.

So, later on, as Jesus is teaching in the temple, the chief priests and others approach him with a question. It is a question about authority. They ask, *Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?*

Honestly, that is a legitimate concern. As temple leaders, they have every right to ask that question. "By what authority do you have to disrupt our temple? Who gave you the authority to teach on our grounds? How do we know that what you are teaching is orthodox?"

Here at First Presbyterian Church, people contact me all the time wanting access to the church and the congregation. They want to sell us a new curriculum, a new program for the youth, they have a seminar that will solve our financial problems (we don't have any), they are musicians who want to sing and deliver their testimony and take up a love offering, they are traveling evangelists who want to preach God's truth to us. When I talk to these folk, the question in the back of my mind is always about authority. What gives you the authority to preach to this congregation? If I were to ask them this question, the answer would be God—God spoke to me, God is directing me, God is leading me. That may be the case, but it is difficult to prove. Established churches accept God's call in people but also believe that God will mention this call to someone up the ladder. God may have called me to be pastor of this church, but God also had a conversation with you as well, and with the presbytery.

Jesus knows their question is a trap. If he says that his authority comes from God, they can hit him with blasphemy. As representatives of the temple, they have the power to determine who is authorized by God and who is not. If he answers that his authority comes from anything else they can denounce him before the people as a fraud. Jesus does not answer their question but instead counters with another question.

Essentially, Jesus' asks the same question to them but about John the Baptist—was John's authority from heaven or was it of human origin. John had been a popular prophet offering his baptism of repentance. John also worked outside the temple system and had been ignored by the temple authorities.

The temple officials refuse to say if John's authority was from heaven or from mortals. Jesus, likewise, refuses to answer. It is a draw.

For those of us reading Luke's gospel, the issue of Jesus' authority is no mystery. It has been established over and over. It is the purpose of this book. From the beginning, from before his birth, the angel Gabriel announced, *He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*' At his baptism, the voice from heaven proclaims, *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.* When he preached in Capernaum, the people exclaimed that Jesus *spoke with authority*. Then, of course, there are his many deeds of power. They should speak for themselves. The chief priests may question Jesus' authority, but we certainly don't.

The real issue for us is not Jesus' authority but the authority we recognize in him—how much authority do we give to Jesus? Do we give ourselves fully to be Jesus' disciples, or do we hold something back? Jesus teaches that following him is not a part-time job; it is a total commitment. As he stated, *No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.* Following requires sacrifice as well—as he explained, *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

This is what Luke is teaching his congregation and it is what he is teaching us. It is not a matter of 'does Jesus have authority,' it is a matter of are we willing to recognize Jesus' authority and give ourselves completely over to him. I pray that we are.