

“Questioning Jesus”

First Presbyterian Church
October 25, 2020

Matthew 21:23-32

Belden Lane, in his article “Rabbinical Stories: A Primer on Theological Method,”¹ tells of several Jewish seminary students who were found playing checkers when they should have been studying the Torah, which is the first five books of the Bible known collectively as the Law. Embarrassed, they immediately returned to their studies.

But the rabbi smiled and told them not to be ashamed, since they should always study the law wherever they find it. And then, he asked if they knew the three rules of checkers. “First,” he said, “one must not make two moves at once. Second, one may move only forward, not backward. And third, when one has reached the last row, then he may move wherever he likes.” Before leaving the room, he left them with one last word, saying, “(That) is (also) what the Torah teaches.” Only much later did the students grasp what they had been taught that day: that they should not clutter their lives with more than one move at a time, that they should always (move forward toward their) goal ..., and that they would become truly free only as they (reached) the last row, making themselves the servants of others.” Reflecting on this, Lane concludes, “Freedom is discovered in obedience. The secret of playing one’s life to its fullest is found in submission to the divine rules of play.”

In today’s New Testament lesson, Matthew tells of a time when Jesus taught about the divine rules of play, the divine rules of living life to the fullest. Matthew tells us that Jesus was teaching in the Temple and the chief priests and elders interrupted him, saying, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

Jesus 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. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

And with that one question, Jesus calls into question the life choices of the chief priests and the elders. Everything they do, every day, from rising in the morning to lying down at night is done in accordance with their religious training about heaven and earth. And any hope they have for the future – for their lives and the life of their community – depends on them knowing, teaching and practicing the Law of God. And here comes Jesus, reinterpreting that Law in a new way, most recently by cleansing the Temple of the money changers, which happened just before this confrontation.

¹ Christian Century, December 16, 1981, 1308.

The money changers were central to the Temple economy, and thus, essential to the chief priests and elders whose lives revolved around the Temple practices and activities. So really, Jesus was questioning their authority. No wonder they ask by what authority he is doing these things.

Now, Jesus could have openly claimed the authority of God given to him, which he embodied. But with Jesus, it's never about him as an individual. It's always about the other person. How can Jesus bring or restore the other person to the faith to right living, even if that other person is attacking him?

Which begs the question for us who also want to help everyone embrace and grow in the faith— how do we respond to others when we feel attacked like Jesus was, or hurt, or embarrassed, or belittled? It's natural for us to fight back, to lash out, to run away, or to puff ourselves up in a snit of crankiness? But Jesus doesn't do any of that. Instead, Jesus uses this as a teaching moment – both for the priests and elders and for those gathered in the Temple that day, a teach moment that we can learn from, as well.

When Jesus asks if John's baptism is from heaven or of human origin, he's giving all of us a tool to use in evaluating our lives. How we answer that question – of heaven or human origin – concerning anything we're facing, will show us how we're doing spiritually at any moment in time, and help us to turn to Lord, and grow as faithful children of God. Think of it as a game. You've all heard about those games where you ask if a famous person is alive or dead, haven't you? Doris Day – alive or dead? Sadly, she died last year.

The point is, instead of playing Celebrity Alive or Dead, try playing "Heaven or Human" with anything that's troubling you or that you're up against. Stuck in traffic – is it of Heaven or Human origin? Human, of course, so don't sweat it. It's nothing you can control and it's nothing you did wrong. It's a useful game, right? a useful tool Jesus gives us. But even more useful is when we switch the game to Challenge Mode. We shift into Challenge Mode when we respond like the chief priests and elders did when confronted by Jesus.

In Challenge Mode, we don't even answer the question Heaven or Human. Instead, we dodge it. When faced with a dilemma or tough situation, instead of answering the question, "Does it really matter, is it of heavenly or human origin," we rig the question in our favor, just like the priest and elders did.

When confronted by Jesus, the priests and elders responded, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

Here, in Challenge Mode, the question is turned around on them, these priest and elders. They become confronted by the question in such a way as to reveal something very important about themselves, that being, what really drives them, and what they are really afraid of.

When faced with the question, “Why then did you not believe in (John the Baptizer),” they have to admit they were more focused on themselves than on God, whose prophet John was standing right before them.

We can play in Challenge Mode, too. “Why then did you run that red light?” Well, if I’m honest with myself I was more concerned about me than anybody else. I wasn’t trusting in God. Or, “Why then did you ignore those bills piling up?” Well, I was afraid there’s no way out. I didn’t turn to God for guidance and support. Or, “Why did you give up on yourself and not try a little harder?” Well, I focused on what others thought of me, rather than how the Lord sees me, as a precious child of God full of promise and hope.

Even precious children of God get tripped up in Challenge Mode. Take for instance the little boy who was sent to his room for misbehaving. After a while he comes out and tells his mother that he thought it over and then said a prayer. “Fine,” said his mother. “If you ask God to help you not misbehave, he will help you.” “Oh, I didn’t ask him to help me not misbehave,” said Johnny. “I asked him to help you to put up with me.”

Now that’s Challenge Mode game play. Obviously, little Johnny isn’t going to win that way in the long run, is he? But what about us? Think about some choice you’re struggling with right now, a problem you’re dealing with, that situation that’s overwhelming you. Think about it. Do you have something in mind?

OK, good. Now imagine the question Jesus would ask of you – something like, “Why then did you not ...” (fill in the blank) – try a little harder, reach out for help, stop yourself from doing that, stop to think and pray before you spoke, or whatever comes to mind, whatever Jesus puts on your heart as a question about how you handled or are dealing with that problem or situation.

I guarantee you, the answer to that question will show you whether you are focused on heavenly assurances or earthly worries, divine strength or worldly temptation, Christian love and acceptance or mistrust and hostility.

The point is, we have a questioning Jesus. In guiding us toward health and wholeness, comfort and acceptance, peace and a blessed life, Jesus questions us, Jesus confronts us

in our choices asking, "If you believe in me, if you trust in me, why then did you not do as I taught you, why then do you not believe what I reveal to you?"

Our world would be so much better off, your life would be so much better off if we would just measure what we say and do by what Jesus teaches "Why then did I not ..." - and then look at our true motives, our areas of weakness, our sense of hopelessness and disbelief.

Life is not that big of a mystery, folks. The biggest mystery, the biggest question to ask yourself each day is, "Why did I not" "Why did I not do as Jesus teaches?" "Why did I not have faith in God?"

By answering those questions openly and honestly, we all can discover and apply the divine rules of living life to the fullest, of recognizing and embracing and moving toward those blessings that God has out ahead for us all. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

God of truth, we come longing for the peace that only you can provide. We seem so often to be tossed to and fro, blown about by every wind except that of your own Holy Spirit.

Send your spirit of comfort and peace for those grieving loss of any kind, your spirit of wisdom and discernment for those treating people through the healing arts, and your guidance and blessing upon all those who seek to minister on your behalf. For you call us to be the hands and feet and heart of Jesus in a world of need.

We pray this in his powerful name, using the words that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**