

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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XIII Pentecost (Proper 21), Matthew 21:23-32

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful the fire of your Love. Amen.

Good morning.

My class attendance my senior year in high school was spotty. My father worked out-of-town, and my mother's job as an attendance clerk at the local vocational/technical school – which was waaaay on the other side of Shreveport – meant that she was out of the house by 6:00 A.M, leaving my two younger sisters and I responsible for getting to Captain Shreve High each day on our own. My schedule included first hour in “Student Council,” which, most days, I evaluated as optional. Coach Poole – a great guy – didn't seem to mind if I missed Calculus second hour, and Ms. Lee, my History teacher in third hour, had previously requested that I take up my studies in the library after she and I had argued in class about her objectivity. Fourth hour, of course, was Yearbook, and Ms. Flanagan, bless her heart, trusted me to get my work done by the time it was due, even if we didn't see one another everyday.

Now, fifth hour was Ms. Neugart and English and she kept careful roll so I had to be there at least most of the time, and gym was last hour which was fun anyway, so most mornings I would drive in my pajamas and drop my sisters in the circle-drive along with the helicopter parents and the school buses. Amanda and Emily would climb out of the Jeep and scowl back at me as I waved and pulled away. At that point, I was free to head over to Grandy's for a “sin-amon” roll; to George's Grill for a ham and cheese omelet; or to the house to get back in bed and sleep until my afternoon classes.

One early afternoon, I was running a little late trying to get to Ms. Neugart's class. Surveying the student lot from the street, I determined there were no open spaces close enough to the building, so I decided to roll through the faculty and staff parking, just to see if I could do better over there. Sure enough, there was one open empty space – marked, “Principal” – right in front of the school. I remember thinking that there was a rule that anybody could park anywhere after a certain time, and, it being late in the day, I assumed I was past the appointed hour, and so I pulled carefully into Coach Powell's spot and ran to class.

After the day's final bell, I was incredulous when I found someone had deliberately parked their truck immediately behind my Jeep, preventing me from leaving. Indignant, I stomped into the school offices and demanded an explanation: “Ms. Russell, I will have you know that *someone* has parked right behind me so that I can't even pull out. I have to get home! I have...appointments! Should I call the tow company, or will you?”

“...and where did you park?” Ms. Russell asked.

“Out front,” I replied.

“Oooohhhh,” she said, “wait here.”

Seething, I waited. And waited. After twenty or thirty minutes, I again approached Ms. Russell, who did not seem to be moving quickly to resolve my problem: “Ms. Russell, I've been waiting *forever*. What is the deal?”

“The deal, Morgan, is that Mr. Dillworth parked behind you, and he said you could sit out here and wait until he leaves for the day.” Now Mr. Dillworth was a broad-shouldered, barrel-chested, former linebacker for the Miami Dolphins. At Captain Shreve, he was the Vice Principal for Discipline, and before Ms. Russell could finish her explanation, I left the reception desk and threw open Mr. Dillworth’s office door so that it smacked against the wall. Stunned, he stood from behind his desk and bellowed, “*Excuuuuuuuuuse* me!” And with a red-faced Ms. Russell on my heels, and an angry NFL veteran in front of me, it was at that moment that I realized I may have made some significant errors in judgment. Rather than apologizing and making amends, I doubled-down on my bad behavior and asked with smug self-righteousness, “Who do you think you are, trapping me on this campus?” Mr. Dillworth did all I suspect he could do without tackling me: he laughed, and then? Well, it was bad for me...really, really not good for a while at school or at home.

Consider the rising tensions leading to this moment of Jesus’ exchange with the Temple leadership: Jesus enters Jerusalem with his followers shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” while “the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’” (Matthew 21:9,10). Jesus enters the Temple “and [drives] out all who were selling and buying...and he [overturns] the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves, [saying to those he confronted], ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers’” (Matthew 21:12, 13). This confrontation is physical and theological...it is personal and political...Jesus gets *in their pockets*. Then, after spending the night in Bethany, outside of the city, he reenters the Temple. Upon this second entry, the religious leadership has had enough and they are ready: they wait for Jesus and immediately confront him...and can you imagine the people watching.

Significantly, “the chief priests and the elders of the people” neither counter the crowd’s identification of Jesus as the “one who comes in the name of the Lord,” nor challenge Jesus’ condemnation of the sacrificial system that had come to sell a blind eye, rather than honor God (Matthew 21:23, 9). Instead, the religious leadership question Jesus’ authority. It’s classic misdirection politics: if you don’t want to hear the prophecy, then attack the prophet.

Jesus, of course, sees through them, and he poses the question regarding John the Baptist’s authority in order to expose their strategy. In response, the chief priests and elders can’t help themselves and take the bait: they double-down on their refusal to consider their responsibilities as religious leaders. They do not discuss what might be true regarding John’s baptism, rather, they discuss what they should say in order to avoid acknowledging either Jesus or his cousin as a legitimate authority and to stay out of trouble with the crowds who press in on them. “We do not know,” they respond...a cop-out of *epic* proportion, fooling absolutely no one not looking to guard themselves against any self-evaluation, whatsoever.

In a country born of revolutionaries, every one of us can tell a story about our proudly – or shamefully – bristling against authority, and our culture still affirms the rebellious spirit: James Dean and Angus Young, Marilyn Monroe and Madonna. And there are, of course, situations that need a rebel to acknowledge a hidden truth, and there are – of course – injustices that ache for a faithful radical to inspire a crowd to stand up for what’s right, and thanks be to God for those with the real courage to meet those special vocations. More often, however – *much* more often – we flippantly question authority in order to avoid a responsibility or to rationalize a bad behavior...*we flippantly question authority in order to avoid a responsibility or to rationalize a bad behavior*. We may cast ourselves as Frederick Douglass or Dorothy Day or

– God help us – as Jesus, when we are, in fact, much more akin to a spoiled rotten, teenaged brat who doesn't like anyone to tell 'em what to do.

At the end of the day, the Temple authorities' questioning of Jesus wasn't about the legitimacy of his authority as a prophet or as the Son of God...rather, their questioning was about their unwillingness to engage the brokenness of their own hearts and their failures to uphold the responsibilities entrusted to them. And as Jesus' confronts them, the chief priests and the elders, and as Jesus confronts their people and the systems of their life together that were unfaithful and required repentance and renewal, so, too, the life of Jesus confronts the hardness of your heart...and my heart...and the heart of the Church...and the broken heart of this world in which we live. In the words of Paul, "Therefore, my beloved...[let us] work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in [us], enabling [us] both to will and work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13). And if we long for reform, then let the reformation begin with our hearts; if the spark of rebellion burns within us and we want for more honorable authorities, then let us become more honorable ourselves and rebel against those desires that draw us from the love of God; and if we hunger for righteous, then let us become those righteous of God who labor in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*