

# Authority in the Garden

In the Garden: Delight

Matthew 21: 23-32

Salem United Methodist Church

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\*All sermons by Rev. Emily are written to be read aloud. Grammar and spelling will reflect her speech patterns. This is provided for anyone who may have trouble hearing or understanding without a written record to follow along. God bless you.

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**This sermon is a practice of “Lectio Divina” and is written as a meditation. If you are reading this, take time to reflect and pray after each bold heading.**

Main focus:

1. Humanize the Pharisees
2. Understanding authority
3. What does it mean to serve God?

Sometimes I write a sermon because its time to write a sermon. I read, I pray, I focus, and I write. And often, I finish the sermon feeling it came from God. And sometimes, I finish, and I can see clearly that its just words. Its just something I came up with. Its not something that I’m comfortable preaching because I know it comes from just me and not from God. That is not a sermon I am willing to preach to you. Yesterday afternoon, I started feeling a nudge from the Holy Spirit that we needed to do something differently. My sermon was just mine. This is a scripture that I want you to engage in. We’ve done this once before, its called Lectio Divina. It is a practice the mystics came up with, and its absolutely lovely and deeply... holy.

How it works? I will guide you and ask questions as I read the scriptures, but you will form your own ideas about Christ. You will be engaging with the scripture yourself. When I ask questions, you are welcome to shout out answers popcorn style, as we have been doing. Or, you can shout out your answers in your heart as you speak with God.

So, take a deep breath. If you are comfortable, shut your eyes. You can also choose to turn your chair and look at something peaceful around the Grove. If your eyes are open I encourage you to focus your attention on something peaceful and not moving, so a tree rather than a squirrel. If an animal passes through your vision, let it pass and come back to what you are focusing on once you realize that you’ve let yourself look past.

I am going to give you different identities as we read this scripture. I’m going to read it in chunks and repeat myself. Try to imagine yourself as the different characters I give you. Today, we will be the Pharisees and we will be Jesus. I’ll give you context and thoughts but *focus on what God is telling you* this morning.

When we're through I'll read the whole thing again twice. Settle in. Take a deep breath.  
**“God, please be with us today. Open the eyes of our hearts. Help us to encounter you in the first person. Help us to know you personally and collectively. Let us feel your presence so we can know you ourselves. Help us to understand your story. Help us to make it our story, too. When people ask us who you are and why we follow, help us to know. Amen.”**

## **First reading**

Matthew 21:23-32

<sup>23</sup> When 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?” <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> Did 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?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> So 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.

<sup>28</sup> “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ <sup>29</sup> He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> The father<sup>al</sup> went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> For 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.

## **Lectio Divina**

### **Pharisee:**

First, you are the Pharisees. Jesus just entered Jerusalem as a triumphant king. You know, riding in on a donkey with cloaks laid on the road in front of him. Shouts of Hosanna, excited whispers, claims that he's a prophet from Galilee!

The people seem excited for the first time in years. You start to wonder...

### **Pharisee: What are you wondering?**

Then Jesus goes RIGHT to the temple—your sacred space! You have spent your entire life caring for this place. Caring for God within the temple. Caring for the laws and the holy rules. Leading the people in righteousness. It is all you have studied. It is literally the focus of your life. Jesus... he flips the tables, sends out the sellers—the ones who sell to poor people coming to make sacrifices. He calls it a den of robbers and drives everyone out!

Then, he invites in all the unclean people and heals them! Right there. In front of them!

### **Pharisee: How are you feeling?**

The scripture says the Pharisees are “indignant.”

Now listen, you hear children shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!”

Blasphemy! Jesus doesn't even try to stop them.

He is not only destroying the holy temple, he is allowing dangerous rhetoric that could unravel your entire way of life.

**Pharisee: What are you thinking?**

**Jesus:**

Rewind. You are Jesus. You just entered Jerusalem. This is the final leg of your journey on your way to being crucified. You are the only one who really knows what will happen. You are the only one who knows you will be betrayed by the people who love you. The people you love.

**Jesus: How are you feeling?**

You get into the city and you go right to the temple. This is your father's house. This is where you are called to be. You enter... you see people... selling things. Selling birds. Selling... sacrifices? They are selling sacrifices to people? Wait, you mean that they now believe that the sacrificial laws are iron-clad and based on specifics rather than intention? I don't want a specific bird to be sacrificed, I want your heart to let go of the world and cling to me!

**Jesus: How are you feeling?**

You can't stand it. You *can't stand it!* This... this is a tax, not an offering. This is a burden, not a way of life. You flip the tables and chase them out. This is NOT my Father's house!

You leave town for the night and return the next day.

You come back to the temple and sit down to teach.

**Now, you are a Pharisee again.**

**LISTEN:**

<sup>23</sup> When 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?"

Authority. What does it mean to have authority? What is authority in 2020? Who has authority? Who do we evaluate for authority in our lives?

**Pharisees, yesterday Jesus chased you out. Why are you asking him this today?**

You have a goal. It's a good goal. You want to protect your way of life. Perhaps your family. Perhaps your community. You certainly want to protect yourself-your ideals, your privilege, your job. Who wouldn't protect themselves? It's human.

Jesus... he's destroying property, scaring sellers, destroying profits. You can't let him continue. The trouble is, the crowd loves him. They need to see him for who he REALLY is! The human blasphemer taking God's name and using it for his own gain! How DARE he claim God's favor when he's breaking every religious law! He is a dangerous liar.

**LISTEN, Pharisees:**

<sup>23</sup> When 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?" <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> Did 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?' <sup>26</sup> But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." <sup>27</sup>

**What will you say?**

**How do you feel?**

You are trying everything. Jesus has to be revealed as a fraud! You have to say something!

## Jesus

Now you are Jesus. You came back. You came back to the temple where so much went wrong yesterday. Can these people be saved? Can they change?

### **JESUS: Why did you come back?**

#### **Listen, Jesus:**

<sup>23</sup> When 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?” <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> Did 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?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> So 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.

Jesus, it seems like you never answer directly! You could tell them you and John are both from God, period!

#### **Why don't you answer directly?**

Jesus never gets sucked into power-play games. Not then, not now. Using Jesus to justify powerful systems that oppress others will never ring true to people who know him. He doesn't tell them what to do, he paints a picture of life in how he answers and what he leaves unsaid. He is painting a life centered around God. A life where going directly to the temple and coming back after a hard day is the only thing that makes sense.

#### **Now, Pharisees, listen.**

And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> So 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.

Of all the frustrating things he has done! This is getting to be too much. He is clever. He is wily. He knows how to turn a question. Power is a precarious thing. We can't keep it without some buy-in from the people. We *need* them on our side! The only answer? “We do not know.”

“We don't know.”

“We don't KNOW!”

“We *don't* know.”

“*[sigh.] We don't know.*”

What does it mean to admit you don't know? Sometimes it is the most faithful response you can give. Sometimes it is a cop-out used to change the subject.

“Oh that? Oh, I don't know. Can anyone really know? Anyway, what are you doing this weekend?”

Sometimes this is a dangerous response. Can you see it? Can you see the danger?

If it is covering something else...like fear, our need for security, our desire to stay in power.

[shrug] “We don't know.”

Listen:

<sup>27</sup> So 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.

### **Pharisees: How do you feel?**

Then, Jesus does what he always does. He launches into a story. Another “lesson” story. Another parable. Normally he tells these biting stories and you are the central bad guy.

### **Pharisees, listen.**

<sup>28</sup> [Jesus says] “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ <sup>29</sup> He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> The father<sup>a</sup> went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?”

### **Pharisees: What is your answer?**

Another story of two brothers. These litter the Old Testament. You asked Jesus about authority trying to discredit him. Why is Jesus telling this story?

### **Pharisees: What is Jesus saying to you?**

#### **Listen:**

<sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> For 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.

Pharisees: You wonder... did I just hear him right? Did he just say tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God before ME? Jesus is insane. He not only can't see everything you do, but seriously? Them? They don't even try! They don't come to temple. They don't honor their bodies. They take advantage of the people by giving to the state! They are **bad**. Jesus... he must actually be crazy. He believes he is God. He is dangerous!

PAUSE.

How often are we Pharisees? How often do we let our fear rule us? I really sympathize with them. They just want their world to continue as it has. They are comfortable and safe. Maybe its like being a UMC pastor-job security and reliable churches. Maybe its like being wealthy in America-comfortable and often removed from the lived, daily experience of poverty. Maybe its like belonging to a small church where everyone knows your name and you have traditions that extend back beyond your first Sunday. You want to honor the traditions because they feel holy. When do we let our comfort become an idol? When do we let our desire for security be more important than our need for God?

Do you worship tradition? Or do you worship God?

And let me tell you, I get it. I love being comfortable. I love traditions that make it easier to plan and prepare. Sometimes traditions can be lifegiving. Sometimes traditions can start beautiful and transform into something unrecognizably rigid. I get it. I have been a Pharisee.

But I don't want to stay there. I don't want to worship the way things have always been done. I don't want to worship people and memories. I don't want to worship rules and regulations.

**I want to worship God.**

By that, I mean I want to be open to the Holy Spirit moving and telling me to do new things. I want to be creative. I want to work with all of you. I want to work with the ideas that God has given each of you. All of our ideas and experiences together, informed by Scripture? THAT is how we worship rightly.

And sometimes we fail. We tell God, “yeah! Sure. Sounds fun.” Then we think about it. Oh... wait, that sounds horrible. Dirty. Lonely. Too hard. Too boring. Too... something. Never mind. Find someone else.

And sometimes, we plan to quit before we fail. We tell God, “no way.” I will NOT do that. I will not serve in that dirty job. I will not volunteer for that position. I will NOT... and then... grace happens. Our hearts are changed. We connect. We are softened. We are made willing. We DECIDE to change our minds. We talk to the visitor at church. We talk to the lonely neighbor. We volunteer to do something new. We pray for someone-out loud! For the first time! Even if its scary! We answer the call, maybe late. But we answer.

We can be the tax collector and the prostitute. We can be the ones of honor who are changed. We can be the ones God lifts up for others. We can show the world God’s power to change *even me*. So, now, rise for the reading of the Gospel. Now, you are you. You are here. At church. Outside. In the middle of a pandemic. You are you and you are listening with everything you have. All your hurts and successes. All your needs and pain. All of your love for God and all the grace you have received.

**Listen.**

## **Final reading**

Matthew 21:23-32

<sup>23</sup> When 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?” <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> Did 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?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> So 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.

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**What will you bring home this week?**