

Meditation for Mothers' Day, May 10, 2015 with OPC

There was a small boy, about 5 years old, who loved going to church. One Sunday after church, he was entirely focused on his mother; in fact, he was a little too focused. He was following her around the house, wherever she went, there he would be, tight behind her. Finally, she got tired of her shadow and asked, "What are you doing? I'm afraid I'm going to step on your foot or fall over you!"

"But I have to. Today in Sunday School, the teacher said we should follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Well, I don't know where He is, but I figure you're the next best thing!" That's quite a compliment, and as any good parent knows, quite a responsibility.

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Why should anyone trust this untrained rabbi to teach the people -- a man in no way connected to the Temple, or to any established body of learn-ed, appointed men of religion, but instead, who wanders the countryside with His band of vagrants?

In Matthew's chronology, it was just yesterday that the people welcomed Him into Jerusalem as a King, waving branches and shouting to Him. Then this Jesus went straight to the Temple, where He caused a HUGE ruckus, upsetting tables & a lot of prominent merchants and bankers. He can't do that! Not without proper permission & authority and there's probably some paperwork involved. This is OUR Temple, think the chief priests → **we** are in charge, **we** control the people, **we own** the scriptures and **we** dictate the correct punishments upon anyone who fails to follow the rules. And besides, if His teachings are true, and His authority IS from God, we're out of a job!

But it backfires → Jesus answers their question with a question: was John's baptism from Heaven, or of human origin? There's a fair chance they truly did know the right answer, but what stops them from saying it?

What stops people from speaking up when a non-believer verbally attacks their faith or their church? What stops us from doing the right thing when the crowd pressures us to do the popular thing?

Fear. The chief priests are afraid of what the crowd might do if they degrade a beloved prophet. And they're very afraid of losing their status if they acknowledge John's authority was from Heaven. Their whole existence is steeped in fear: they maintain control by making the people afraid of them; they stomp out any threat to their lofty position or to the institution that elevates & protects them, for fear of losing the carefully crafted façade that they're superior & righteous. When one lives as a perpetrator of fear, it's bound to be difficult to recognize and to accept the life-giving teachings of Jesus Christ.

But Jesus will not give up on them! "What do you think?", He asks as He persists with another parable that is only found in Matthew. Look how Jesus' discussion with the elders actually escalates in depth & meaning & urgency, from a simple question, to a parable with another question and a lesson summary, to yet another more graphic and complex parable, concluding with a final warning.

It's as if Jesus, at this point less than 4 days from His arrest, is saying to the religious leaders, 'PLEASE hear me, I'm going to try again, please hear & understand what I'm saying to you about true righteousness & obedience to God'.

Why should we listen? We have free will. Why do we respond to God's authority? Let's break it down → 2 sons asked to work in the vineyard; one agrees but doesn't follow through; the second refuses but then returns to do as he's asked. Why? What authority does a father or parent have in our lives? 'Gonna get a beating' won't advance the parent-child relationship too far or too well. And if it's just obligation, then something essential is missing and eventually, there could be resentment. Why might the second son return to do his father's will?

Onto the next parable, must keep moving! If God is the landowner, we're the tenants, and this gorgeous planet is the vineyard, what do we do with these other details: a fence around it, a wine press, and a watchtower? The Bible is not carelessly written, every detail *means* something. God's fence is not a confinement or a punishment – it's an acknowledgement that we have limits, and He's trying to keep us safe. The wine press? He's given us the tools & equipped us to thrive & to produce the fruits of His kingdom. The watchtower? How else can we see what's potentially out there that could cause us harm, or watch for others who also need to come into a safe place? Do the tenants actually DO anything to merit these gifts from the landowner? Does the Landowner ask for anything unreasonable from the tenants? Are the tenants – us – consistently free to choose their fate?

Where does it come from, the power of God? His power certainly isn't like the power of ISIS, or Boko Haram – they operate on a foundation of fear which does not give them the *right* to rule. The power of apartheid, or the KKK is based in ignorance which can breed hatred. They have no right. The power of Cosmopolitan magazine, or TV commercials, or Hollywood movies, or some social media sites, or any medium that tries to influence people to *be* or *dress* or *act* a certain way is based on lies & greed, and I hope no one here falls for the money-motivated deception that life will be perfect as soon as you buy their diet pills, and their anti-aging creams, and invest in their get-rich-quick schemes, and buy that car that everyone in the commercial appears deliriously happy driving.

The source of God's power is different. Why did the tax collectors and the prostitutes follow Jesus? What makes us repent our selfish decisions and return to Him, to do His will? To what power do you respond with joy?

In 2008, I was chaperoning a trip to Egypt with 16 high school kids. Each chaperone was assigned 3 or 4 teens to look after, to corral onto the bus and through market places, ancient sites and so on. But I wasn't their teacher, wasn't a parent or a relative – on paper, I really didn't have any authority over these kids at all. We were about 6 days into the trip when we arrived at Luxor, disembarking after 3 days & 2 nights on an Egyptian felucca – it's a sailboat with a platform deck, about 8'X 10', on which 8 of us ate, slept, entertained ourselves, etc! After living in such close quarters, we knew one another pretty well!

In Luxor, we were able to spend some time in the market. I stopped for about 5 seconds to look at something, looked up, and my girls were gone. I couldn't see them anywhere and began frantically looking into stalls. After a few minutes, panic set in. You see, I'd already had experience with a shopkeeper in Cairo, from whom we had to physically extricate one of the teen girls – that shopkeeper had barred the door & was determined to keep her. Misplacing someone in Egypt isn't like losing someone at the mall – a missing teenage girl in Egypt could end up in the slave trade, never to be seen again.

Finally, after about 15 or 20 minutes of searching & asking everyone, I saw the girls coming toward me. I hugged all 3 at once while saying, "Where have you been? I've been going crazy, because I love you and if I ever lost you,

I'd never forgive myself!" They just stared for a moment, mouths open. Finally they said, "Well, we love you too, and we're so sorry for upsetting you!"

For the rest of the trip, wherever we were, they'd call to me, "Jane, we love you, and we're just going to be in here for a bit", and I'd call back, "Ok, thanks, I love you too, and I'll join you in just a minute". We had changed the language and changed the basis of our relationship. It wasn't about any usual worldly understanding of authority, that they should do something because I'm the adult and I say so. Instead, we openly acknowledged and respected our mutual affection.

Only one power actually matters in the world. The only power that can transform lives and conflicts and affect miracles and make ordinary people feel extraordinary. It's not a product or a management trick or a leadership skill or a policy you can enforce. We have to ask to be God's channel, we have to feel it, we have to mean it when we share it. It's love => the base nature of our almighty Creator, the reason for Christ's mortal existence, and the engine that moves the Holy Spirit. And it's free!

Jesus showed love through His attention & respect to the tax collectors, prostitutes, and all sorts of sinners, before they believed and changed their ways. And even though they would never believe, Jesus loved the chief priests enough to keep trying to reach them, and to warn them of the consequences.

I encourage each of us to pray for God's love to flow through us and our conversations, and to change our approach, especially to difficult people & situations. And this is going to sound terribly naïve, but so what - bit by bit, person by person, His love, His power will blanket the earth with peace. Believe it, and let's make it so. Amen.