

Sermon follow up
1/24/16
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Mark 11:27-33

In this passage from Mark's gospel, Jesus shows his solidarity with John. Just as John straddles the old and new covenants, with one foot in the old creation and one in the new, so he also is both an insider and an outsider. As a priest and prophet, he holds recognized offices within Israel and thus his authority is official. At the same time (like a lot of prophets), he exercises his ministry in an anti-establishment kind of way. God often works from the margins, rather than from the center, and John is a textbook example. He carries out his ministry to Israel as far away from the temple as he can get, out in the wilderness, in exile. John is the last of the old covenant prophets, so he is taking Israel back to her founding moment, heralding a new exodus, which Jesus will inaugurate. To be baptized by John, the Israelites had to admit that the nation was functionally under the curse of exile; they had to go out of the land (across the Jordan) and then re-enter in a kind of exile/exodus re-enactment. They also had to admit they were lepers in need of cleansing (since the baptismal washing from leprosy was one of the few that had to be administered by someone else, rather than being self-administered). In short, John's baptism required the people to admit they were unclean and unfit to meet God; in John's baptism, they were being cleansed and prepared for the coming of their God.

When John baptized Jesus, it was not necessarily identical to the other baptisms John performed. John baptized for the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus had no sins to forgive, so what's going on when he gets baptized? Jesus is being numbered with the transgressors (cf. Isa. 53). He is showing his willingness to be identified with sinners precisely so he can rescue sinners. He becomes a sinner (representatively) so we can become righteous (representatively). He becomes one of us so we become like him. Think of the parable in Luke 18, where the Pharisee thanks God he is not like other men. In his baptism, Jesus delighted to become like other men. In his baptism, he became our head in an official way, so he could bear our sins and atone for them. Baptism unites him to us and us to him. In his baptism, he came to stand in our place, so that in our baptisms, we might stand in his.

It is interesting that Jesus (in a roundabout way) ends up grounding his authority in the baptism of John. As I pointed out in the sermon, this drives us back to the beginning of Mark's gospel. Certainly, John's baptism of Jesus was not just another Johannine baptism; it was unique in many respects (e.g., it was not for the forgiveness of sins since Jesus had no sins that needed forgiving). At the same time, Jesus' baptism, as Calvin pointed out, was a model or template for what happens in

our baptisms. Jesus was baptized in the wilderness, the place of curse and exile because he would endure curse and exile for his people. In his baptism, he received the Spirit, that he might share the same Spirit with his people in their baptisms. In his baptism heaven was opened and the Father spoke words of life; likewise, in our baptism, we are qualified to enter heaven (Heb. 10) and adopted as beloved children of the Father (Gal. 3). In his baptism he inaugurated the new age and the new humanity; in our baptisms, we enter the regeneration as well (Titus 3).

But this also means that in some way Jesus shares his authority with those baptized into union with him. We are united to Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6) as well as his present reign (Eph. 2). In other words, your baptism is not from men but from heaven. You were baptized by God, not by men, even though God used a man to administer your baptism. In your baptism you became an ambassador and representative of Christ. You became a prince, a king in training. And now you have authority to speak to the world on Christ's behalf. To be sure, your authority as Christ's representative and spokesman is conditioned on your obedience and your faithfulness to Scripture. It is, as Presbyterians like to say, a ministerial and derivative power. Thus, you are not to deliver your own message, but his! But properly understood, baptism serves as a launching pad for your personal ministry. It gives you an office in the kingdom of God, it gives you certain powers, roles, and responsibilities.

What does your baptism authorize you to do? Many things, of course. In the medieval period, a whole tradition of civil disobedience arose out of the doctrine of baptism. Christians could disobey kings when those kings called on them to sin in some way because in baptism we were made citizens of a higher kingdom with loyalty to a heavenly king. The right of godly defiance was grounded in baptism. Today, we often hear Christians challenged, 'Who do you think you are, judging others and telling others how to live?' This is especially true when it comes to sexuality issues, where our culture has most consistently cast off any external authority for the sake of personal autonomy. But our baptisms give us a right to tell others what Jesus has communicated in his Word. I'm not saying you need to appeal to your baptism when an unbeliever challenges your truth claims – that probably won't make sense to him. But your baptism should give you confidence, since in your baptism God clothed you with Christ and in so robbing you, vested you with official authority as a member of his royal priesthood. God's activity in our baptisms is crucial to understanding our mission.

The question, of course, is how we will use the powers and privileges granted to us in our baptisms. Some Christians go on to compromise – to become pragmatic, or politically expedient, or focused on preserving popularity, like the representative of the Sanhedrin in Mark 11.

The unique authority of Jesus is on display throughout the gospel. He has authority to do miracles, to forgive sins, to teach (and even his teaching style had a unique authority, unlike the scribes, as noted at the end of the Sermon on the Mount). But it was when he struck at the heart of the temple system that the Jewish leaders finally decided they had enough of the rogue rabbi and decided to challenge his authority openly. The attack on the temple was the last straw because the temple was a source of power, prestige, and yes, a steady income stream, for the Jewish leadership. When Jesus threatened their power and their money, they couldn't sit by idly. They had to act to stop him.

The Sanhedrin was the highest functioning authority in Israel. The members of the Sanhedrin would have traced their authority back to the law, and thus claim it came from God himself. They were also recognized by and underwritten by the Roman Empire, which used intermediate authorities like the Sanhedrin to keep order amongst their subjugated peoples. Thus a challenge to the Sanhedrin was going to also, by extension, be a challenge to Rome, on whose power the Sanhedrin rested.

Mark 11:27 mentions the three groups that made up the Sanhedrin. In Jesus earlier passion predictions in mark 8, 9, and 10, he has already said he would be handed over to these groups in order to be crucified. The fact that these members of the Sanhedrin are now trying to trap him (and then judge him and condemn him to death) shows us we are arriving at the climatic moment of Mark's gospel. The showdown is here.

Chief priests were not only in charge of the temple liturgy and sacrifices, they were also teachers and judges in Israel. It was their job to hear cases and render verdicts. Because they were in charge of the temple, they believed they had a right to take on Jesus after he had momentarily shut down the temple the day before. Jesus had encroached on their turf when he started turning over tables.

The scribes were experts in the law, sort of the theology PhDs of their time and place. Their expertise was supposedly going to be useful in trapping Jesus with questions from the law.

The elders were the shepherds and representatives of the people and were involved in rendering judgments in various types of cases. They were social authorities in Israel. As such, they could arrest Jesus for being a "disturber of the peace."

In this whole section in Mark, Jesus is being put to the test. He is on trial. His authority is on trial.

The Jewish leaders believe they are in charge. But they are about to find out there is a new sheriff – that is, a new king and new chief priest – in town. The messianic King

has arrived. Instead of testing him, they should submit to him. Instead of challenging him, they should trust and follow him.

It is interesting that in challenging Jesus' authority, they take their own authority for granted. They never consider to question themselves and ask where they got their authority. We might ask: What right did they have to question Jesus? Who authorized them to challenge the messiah?

If they claim that their authority was linked to the law and to Rome, Jesus can trump them. His authority comes from heaven, directly from the Father who sent him.

Contrast Jesus' authority with that of the members of the Sanhedrin. The members of the Sanhedrin act as if they are above the rules (kind of like Uncle Andrew and Queen Jadis in *The Magician's Nephew*). They are grasping and selfish. They seek to seize authority for themselves like Adam in the Garden. They make decisions based on their hunger for power. By contrast, Jesus acts in self-giving love.
