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Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25, Matthew 22: 34-46
25 October 2020
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

Many of you know that for most of my career I was a non-parochial priest and served, instead, as a medical ethicist in a number of large acute care hospitals and hospital systems. As a medical ethicist, I was sometimes called into highly charged clinical settings where the family of a dying patient was expressing their grief by lashing out angrily at each other or, more often, at the patient's doctors and nurses. At other times, I was called into tense corporate settings where high-stakes mergers and acquisitions were being discussed by health care executives, executives whose jobs and reputations were on the line. I didn't enjoy these conflicted situations, but I learned to function in them. Indeed, I was somewhat surprised when, near the end of my career, a hospital chaplain observed that I typically handled such conflicts asking questions, gently but firmly and directly. Of course, these had to be the right questions, asked at the right time, and addressed to the right people. But the point is, my chaplain-colleague helped me reflect on the strategies I had learned for dealing with conflicted situations involving powerful emotions and powerful people – one of which was asking questions. And when we read today's Gospel lesson from Matthew, we see that I'm not alone.

In this Gospel lesson, we find Jesus in two conflicted confrontations or disputes with Pharisees. Pharisees tend to get bad press in the New Testament, but you may recall that they were working sincerely and diligently to bring their faith to bear on their everyday lives, and also that Jesus had admirers and even a few followers among the Pharisees. But as we see, that doesn't mean they didn't

sometimes come into conflict. This morning, I want to concentrate on the second confrontation—the first, about the greatest commandment, is extremely important, but Jesus’ answer was probably not controversial for the Pharisaic lawyer who was trying to test him. Jesus passed that test with flying colors (in Luke’s Gospel we learn that Jesus was indeed somewhat controversial in his answer – he expanded the definition of neighbor to include all people). In the second confrontation, however, Jesus turns the tables and tests the Pharisees. He asks *them* a question, and the implications of that question would prove to be *very* controversial.

That being said, and before we jump into this controversial question, we always want to remember to ask two questions of our own. First, to the extent we can determine it, what might the words of Jesus have meant to those who actually heard them? And second, if we can reach a conclusion to our first question, what might be the relevance of that conclusion for us, 20 centuries on from Jesus and in a very different cultural setting? Both of these questions can be exceedingly hard to answer for reasons I don’t have time to discuss, but here I want to urge us not to go too quickly to the second question without wrestling with the first.

So, we begin with some background. These confrontations with the Pharisees in today’s lesson are only two examples of many others, most of which – and here’s the important point – *were triggered by Jesus’ so-called “cleansing” of the Temple*. Recall that this event followed his dramatic entry into Jerusalem near the beginning of Passover, on what we call Palm Sunday, where the people hailed him as the “son of David,” a royal title. The choice by Jesus to enter Jerusalem at this time was no accident, and coincidentally it was a time when

tensions were already running very high – both the Roman and Jewish leaders were trying to keep a lid on the fervent Jewish population. Biblical scholars now believe it is better to understand Jesus' actions in the Temple as the *performative destruction* of the Temple. In other words, his actions there were a powerful symbolic combination of words and deeds, acted out in public, and intended to convey his prophetic message the Temple will *in fact* be destroyed unless the Jewish people change their ways.

Now, back to today's lesson. Jesus' question to the Pharisees is the last of six *riddles*, five of which were responses to questions posed to Jesus by various competing groups in Jerusalem in an effort to discredit him (an example of a riddle that may be more familiar to you was when Jesus was tested about paying taxes and he asked for a Roman coin). The sixth riddle, as we heard, was posed as a question by Jesus himself to the Pharisees who were trying to trap him into saying something that could be used to condemn or discredit him. Instead, Jesus poses a riddle for them about the Messiah – a figure from Jewish prophecy that was much hoped for but whose identity and role were much debated.

'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'"? 'If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?'

The passage Jesus is quoting is from Psalm 110, and again it is being used to justify Jesus' right – that is, his authority – to do and say what he did in the

Temple, and this in two ways. First, the Psalm goes on to claim that the Messiah will be “a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” Mentioned in Genesis, Melchizedek was a mysterious Canaanite priest-king based in ancient Jerusalem, who – surprisingly – was honored by Abraham and whose authority Abraham recognized. The reference by Jesus to this Psalm suggests that the Messiah will not only be a king, but also a priest, and moreover, a priest who will have greater authority over the Temple than the traditional Jewish priesthood. Second, the Psalm also includes an enthronement scene, and Jesus is also alluding to it in order to suggest that the Messiah will be enthroned at the right hand of God and will exercise judgment over the enemies of God (though it is likely Jesus had a different view as to who counted as God’s most significant enemies). But the point is that, without really saying anything directly –just asking the question – Jesus is claiming an authority that is greater than David’s and, with that authority, he is also claiming that he can, indeed, legitimately act in judgment about what was then going on in the Temple (NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 507-510).

At the end of all this, which is admittedly quite cryptic on Jesus’ part, we are told that the Pharisees either couldn’t or wouldn’t respond and that they didn’t dare ask him anymore questions. Again, some biblical commentators believe that all of this culminates in the prediction of the Temple’s eventual destruction and, thus, when it happens in 70 AD, to the vindication of Jesus as a prophet and, more importantly, as the Messiah—not, however a Messiah like the Jews expected. As we’ve often observed, Jesus’ only weapons were his performative deeds and words. We know the end of the story. He was a Messiah who would lose the battle but ultimately win the war by his own sacrificial death.

As another commentator observed, of all those who claimed to be messiahs before and after Jesus, his community of followers is the only one that survived.

That last observation goes a long way to addressing what relevance these cryptic words of Jesus might have for us as Christians – he is our Messiah, our high priest, and now sits at the right hand of God. But perhaps there’s another point to be made by asking yet another question: How might *we* confront powerful leaders, like the leaders of the Pharisees, who are acting improperly – because, whatever sympathy Jesus may have had for the Pharisees, he thought their leaders at least had largely sold out to the Romans. And especially, how might we confront such leaders when, like Jesus, we don’t share the power or the status of the leaders and, like Jesus, we don’t want to resort to violence? As we know only too well in midst of a woefully, tragically inadequate response to the COVID-19 virus, it is their *power* as leaders that makes such a confrontation risky for us and, if they are not confronted, it is their *status* as leaders that can greatly amplify the harmful consequences of their improper actions...So, again, how might we as Christians confront powerful leaders who are acting improperly? One strategy we can learn from Jesus is to ask very carefully worded questions of these leaders, firmly and directly, and we need to do so publicly, with witnesses. This is what we see Jesus doing in today’s lesson. It turns out that he was very, very good at it. Some of our officials and some of the members of the press are very good at this, too. We need to get better at it ourselves. Amen.