

Change
Matthew 21:23-32
Rev. Dan Schumacher

“Don’t change a thing for the first six months — not even the bulletin.”

That was the advice I was given by a trusted mentor when he’d heard that I’d accepted the call to serve as Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church of Colorado Springs.

“Churches have sacred cows,” he went on. “That ugly vase that you think should go in the garbage may have been given to the church by one of its most revered matriarchs. Casually removing it from the altar is akin to callously erasing her memory. Don’t do it. Just don’t do it,” he said.

I kind of knew what he was talking about, because a year or two earlier I had gone home to the church where I was raised, the church where Christen and I were married. I had gone there in order to officiate the funeral for my nineteen-year old sister-in-law, who had been killed in a tragic car accident.

It had been years since I’d been in that church, and when I walked in the sanctuary looked just like it always had: rose carpet, pews in their places, white walls, cathedral ceiling, piano on the left, empty place for an organ on the right (we never were “high church” enough to actually ever get that organ though we always reserved a place for it).

Everything was just as I remembered... everything except for one very noteworthy difference.

Over the piano box was an enormous elk head — a six point bull, to be exact. A trophy mount hanging right there in the sanctuary, looking like it belonged on a tavern wall. This was a new level even for our “Small-town, Wyoming” church. The elk mount was hung on the wall in such a way that when the pianist sat down to play at the piano, she had to hunch over and lean to the side so as not to be licked by its tongue, which was hanging out the side of its mouth — an artistic choice by the taxidermist, I suppose.

Afterwards, I sought out the pastor who, at this point, had only been there a few months. I asked him pastor-to-pastor, why the elk head... and why in the sanctuary of all places?

He rolled his eyes with contempt, sighed, and said, “It belonged to one of our long-time members. When he died his wife gave it to us in his memory. She had it mounted and hung on the wall before we could even discuss what to do with it. Now, here I am stuck with it staring at me with its tongue hanging out while I preach!”

Some churches have “sacred cows,” and apparently others have “sacred elk!”

So I knew what my mentor was getting at when he said, "Don't change a thing for the first six months – not even the bulletin."

Well... I changed the bulletin my second week here...

It's not quite the same as the first change Jesus made in the temple, is it?

On that fateful day, he rode a donkey down from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, marched into the temple, drove out all who were buying and selling, and overturned the tables of the money changers.

And as the sound of loose change hitting the floor was still ringing in their ears, he said, "It is written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer;
but you are making it a den of robbers' (Matt. 21:13)!

Can you imagine that?

What if, instead of – you know – changing the bulletin my second Sunday here, I marched in, flipped over the altar table, pulled over the flags, crashed the offering plates to the ground, and started ranting and raving about how you had desecrated this house of worship?

I doubt you remember that I even changed the bulletin on my second Sunday, but I bet you'd still be talking about it if I'd flipped over the tables, wouldn't you? What would have happened, do you suppose, if I *had* done that?

I can tell you what would have happened. If I had done that – if I'd rolled in like a bulldozer on my second Sunday here, the elders and leaders of our church would have come to me afterwards and, in no uncertain terms, said, "Just who do you think you are?"

That's exactly what the elders and chief priests did to Jesus once they heard what *he* had done.

They came and found him where he was teaching and they asked him, "Just who do you think you are?"

They didn't use those words, but that is what they asked him. What they said was, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority" (Matt. 21:23)?

"The point of the question," says New Testament Scholar, Brian Blount, "is to make him confess that he doesn't have any authority. At least not the *right* authority."

Unless he's forged himself a really good fake resume or gotten himself ordained by one of those questionable online churches, *he has no authority*. He has no college degree, no seminary degree. He has no doctorate of ministry. No one has voted him into office or ordained him or laid hands on him or set him apart. And the way to get people to see that he has no authority is to ask him to show his credentials — because they know he can't produce any.

How do they know for sure he won't be able to produce any credentials? How can they be so certain? *Because they are the ones who give out the credentials*. They are the organization behind their organized religion. And everyone knows that they speak for God.

But the chief priests and the elders know that Jesus thinks that *he* speaks for God, and they just need to get him to say it out loud. *That is the trap*. "If we didn't authorize you to say and do these things, Jesus, then who did? Say it, Jesus. Say what you believe. Say that *God* authorized you!"

It's a good trap, because Jesus can only answer it one of two ways:

The first is to acknowledge that he has no human authorization — no diploma, no certificate of ordination — which would make him look... well... foolish.

And the second makes him look a nut job. "God authorized you? You talk to God, do you? You couldn't even get into seminary, but you talk to God, huh? Yeah, right... Go on. Get outta here."

In our day, that's embarrassing. In Jesus' day? In our day, you say you speak for God, people mock you. In Jesus' day, you say you speak for God? They kill you.

It's called blasphemy — and they just need him to say it in public, so that they can use the correct public response. Blasphemy, remember, is the very crime Jesus will be crucified for later. He will be sentenced to death by Caiaphas, the chief of the chief priests, for the crime of blasphemy (Matt. 26:65-66). It's no joke. This trap is meant to be the death of him.

And *that* is what is at stake when they ask him, "by whose authority are you doing these things?"

I might get chased out of town if I pulled that elk head off of the wall over the piano or I changed the order service too much, but I've never known stakes like those pressed on Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't seem to be ready to go there — at least not yet. He will, but not yet. Maybe he doesn't want to lose control of his ministry just yet. Maybe he's got still more to pour into his disciples. Maybe he's got still more *to do*.

So he takes a sudden and unexpected turn. He answers their question with a question of his own. He ambushes the very ones who ambushed him.

He says, "I'll answer your question, but only if you answer mine first. You want to talk about authority so much, then answer this: John the Baptist, from where did *his* authority come? Was it from God or was it from humans?"

The people? The people *loved* John — wild-eyed, camel-hair wearing, locust eating prophet that he was. They flocked to the Jordan to be baptized by him, ate up every word he said, even believed in the repentance he preached and changed their ways to follow him.

But the religious leaders? No way. They mocked him. They ridiculed his crazy antics... and his crazy theology. So, they can't say *God* commissioned him, because *they* ignored him. But they can't say he was just off his rocker either, because they feared how the crowd might react.

They found themselves in a Catch-22... put between a rock and hard place... caught in a pickle.

They can't answer without looking bad. If they *don't* answer they look bad. And if they try to do what he did, answer the question with a question, they will look bad. There was no way they could come out looking good.

How did Jesus do this?

And if this hadn't already gone bad enough for the chief priests, Jesus piles on with a parable:

"Ok. That one was too tough," he seems to say. "Let me toss you a softball. How do you read this one? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard.' The son answered, 'I will not,' but later *changed his mind* and went.

The father went to the second son and said the same; and he answered "I go, sir," but never went.

Now, which of the two *did* the will of his father?"

Well, this one was easy. Of course the first one *did* the will of his father.

And then it dawns on them — like someone had just turned on the light in their dimly lit attics: giving our Father lip service isn't enough... we have *to do* what our Father desires.

At this point, they're against the ropes, and still Jesus pulls no punches. He says to the clergy and the elders and the cradle-rolled members, "*You* have been given every

advantage to know the will of the Father, and still you do not *do* it. But the tax collectors and the sex workers heard John preach, and they believed him.”

And in one final blow, he says to them — and maybe to us, too — “Even after you saw it, *you did not change* your minds and believe him” (Matt. 21:32).

On October 18, we will reconvene in this sanctuary to worship God — the very same God who authorized John the baptist and the very same God who authorized Jesus.

While some things will feel different, many things will be the same.

We will sit in our comfortable pews. We will look out at our magnificent stained-glass windows, and up at gloriously arched ceilings. Together, we will refill this sanctuary with our bodies. Together, we will lift up our prayers to God. Together, we will listen to music of praise. Together, we will hear the stories of scripture be read and preached. Together, we will hear the teachings of Jesus.

What a shame it would be if we did all of that, and were not open to being *changed* by it.

And, I don’t mean silly changes — like changes to the bulletin or to the order of service.

I mean *change* — deep change — the kind of change that turns even tax collectors and sex workers and all sorts of riff-raff into *brothers and sisters*.

I mean the kind of change that turns hardened hearts into *pliable clay*.

I mean the kind of change that turns repeat offenders into *liberated souls*.

I meant the kind of change that turns sinners into *saints*.

I mean the kind of change that turns even the most pious Christian into *a loving one*.

We have a word for that in the Christian faith. We call it conversion. And in its truest sense, it is about change — changing our minds, changing our attitudes, changing our actions — so that we might look more like Jesus.

Change is hard. But I recall the story of Mahatma Ghandi, and his run in with a reporter.

He was, one time, speaking with a group of news reporters when he made a claim. One of the reporters became irate, called him a hypocrite, and berated him, saying, “I heard you speak just last week, and you said the exact opposite thing — you made the exact opposite claim! How do you justify flip-flopping like that?”

Ghandi paused for a moment and then said, "Clearly, I've learned something in the last week."

How might Christ be inviting you to be changed?

Then don't just say it.

Do it.

Amen.

**A great deal of credit for the explanation of the "trap" set by the chief priests and elders in this sermon is due to Dr. Brian Blount and his sermon, "What Do You Know?", accessed at asermonforeverysunday.com on September 22, 2020.