

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

POWER PLAYS

Matthew 21:23-32

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

23 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?" 24 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. 25 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?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." 27 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. 28 What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 31 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. 32 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.”

DIAGNOSIS: Might Makes Right

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): *Clamping Down*

What are “these things” (v. 23) that Jesus’ opponents are complaining about? Doubtless the cleansing of the temple (21:12-13) and the curing of “the blind and the lame” on sacred precincts that the blind and lame have no business entering in the first place (Lev. 21:18). “By what authority” is Jesus doing them? Certainly not the authority of the big guns who are asking (“chief priests,” not mere priests; “elders of the people,” not mid-level bureaucrats, v. 23). Else why would they have rolled out to bark the question in person? We grasp intuitively, of course, that the question is false and empty, quite beside the real point of simply shooting down the upstart. Why do we grasp this? Because that’s how authority as we know it regularly behaves. That includes, God help us, the authority we too easily exercise ourselves within the domain of our own small spheres: family, church, work place, you name it. Old Authority, let’s call it. OA for short, or in its alias, AA, Adamic Authority. OA’s defining trait is to operate for its own sake with genuine regard for neither God nor neighbor. If the blind stay blind and “robbers” rule in the “house of prayer” (21:13), so be it. Better that than to let its prerogatives be challenged or its weight diminished. Better might than right, in other words. That’s OA’s fundamental maxim.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): *Under the Gun*

Old Authority is fearful authority, and in a double sense. For one thing it runs scared. It has to. You can’t opt for might over right without leaving yourself vulnerable to criticism. That’s because the underlings, equipped by God with consciences,

have something of a nose for right behavior and are also quick to smell a rat. Wielders of OA are for that reason easily cornered, as Jesus does with them here. In this case their weak spot is their fear of a crowd that will turn on them with a vengeance the moment it catches a whiff of their dishonesty on the subject of John (v. 26). Who else but God could be responsible for John's coming "in the way of righteousness" (v. 32)? If even "the tax collectors and the prostitutes" can see that, why not chief priests and elders? But if chief priests and elders refuse to see it—refuse they must; the sin John exposed happened on their watch—so throw the rascals out! Thus the certain verdict of the crowd; for fear of which OA turns fearful in the second sense of coming down like a ton of bricks on those who threaten to expose them, in this case Jesus: "Let him be crucified!" (27:22). Thus does might make right, where "right" is understood solely and obscenely as the preserving of might. For contemporary (if less extreme) parallels, see the usual fate of the corporate whistleblower; or consider what happens to the seventh-grader who dares to critique the teacher's unfair treatment of a classmate.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): *De-Authorized*

The grim truth for all practitioners of Old Authority—chief priest, foolish father, squirming bureaucrat, ham-fisted pastor: fear squelched is nothing more than fear postponed. That's because OA has its source in the God who doled it out in the first place whether by granting dominion over birds, fish, and creatures or by authorizing Aaron's anointing or by commanding children to obey their parents "that it may be well with you." As this last phrase suggests, might and right are meant to coincide, the former serving to accomplish the latter. If the authorized ones refuse to do it, then the Authorizer will ultimately do it in their stead and at their expense, his might making right what they made wrong, and to their own wretched

undoing. Thus “the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you,” “you” being the son or daughter who failed to do “the will of his father” or hers (v. 31). For such as these, a word is waiting: “Depart from me you evildoers” (7:21, 23; see also Ezekiel 18:26, a piece of the day’s Old Testament reading). Might makes right indeed! And the Father, who has “no pleasure in the death of anyone” (Ez. 18:32), grieves a mighty grief...

PROGNOSIS: Right Makes Might

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): *Real Muscle For A Change*

...from the depths of which comes the astounding mercy of a New Authority (NA) that undoes Old Authority’s failure by turning its dynamic inside out. This, by the way, is the precise answer to the priests’ and elders’ question (v. 23): “By what authority?” Answer: By an authority hitherto “hidden” from old authoritarians (11:25), and hence utterly new to them—so new that they haven’t a prayer of grasping it unless and until the Author “chooses” to clue them in (11:27). If for now he chooses not to (“neither will I tell you,” v. 27), that’s because NA is hardly “a thing to be grasped” (Phil. 2:6, second lesson, RSV) through mere discussion. In any case it needs first to be established in a great doing by its Author, a doing that won’t be complete until his cry of dereliction splits the Good Friday sky (27:46). This is the Son shrieking, the One Good Boy who labors in the vineyard to the last drop of blood, thus doing right (i.e. “the will of his father,” v. 31; 26:39) as none of his siblings would or could begin to do, least of all the big shots among them. That labor, after all, will have entailed an unthinkable forsaking of might (26:53-54; see also and definitively the second lesson, Phil. 2:5-8). Hence the NA progression: right comes first and only then the might, specifically the might that raises Jesus from the dead (28:2-4)

and grants him “all authority in heaven and on earth” (28:18). That includes—how can it not?—the authority to introduce OA’s dead practitioners to brand new life and the sweet ways of New Authority. See the Parable of the Forgiven Servant, Part I (18:23-27). So it is that even chief priests can find themselves in the mighty procession, headed by cheats and whores, of those who are “going into the kingdom of God” because Jesus did right for them (v. 31).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): *Out From Under*

These days New Authority also has its practitioners, authorized by Jesus (10:1, 28:19-20). His right is their might, and when they believe this they are fearless. This fearlessness of theirs is the trait that most obviously distinguishes them from the old authoritarians they were and, in their bouts with disbelief (14:30-31, 28:17b), continue to be. Not so, however, when the engine of trust starts firing on all cylinders. That’s when they grasp that Christ’s rightness for them has put them beyond the pale of God’s criticism; and if now they have nothing to fear from God, the potential destroyer of “both soul and body in hell,” how possibly can they be afraid of lesser threats (10:28)? Such fearlessness is a mighty thing. Among other things it impels the bravado of losing not a day but a life of days on labor in the vineyard both in imitation of the Good Son and for the sake of the right that remains to be done in his name (cf. 16:24-25). Beyond that it wows the crowd which, seeing good works unalloyed with self-serving hypocrisy, “give[s] glory to [the] Father in heaven” (5:16). For examples of NA’s dynamic in point-of-fact operation, pay attention to the saints at work in your local congregation; or read a page or two of honest church history.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): *Going Global*

Another big difference between OA and NA: new authoritarians spread the wealth. They do so after the fashion and by the

command of Christ whose driving concern was never for his own position—else how could he wind up positioned on a cross?—but always and only for the Father’s will and glory and the well-being of the brother, sister, or neighbor. This is his rightness and the source of his might, both of which he has passed along to us who trust him. How do we exercise our might? By extending the rightness of Christ to the blind or lame neighbor and making her mighty in turn. Try forgiving her sins to the tune of seventy times seven (18:22) and see how she starts standing tall, even clicking her heels. Or teach her “to obey everything that I have commanded you” (28:20); and notice how her eyes, like yours, are coming alive with the sparkle of joy. Then step back and watch as she does to someone else as you’ve done to her and as Christ keeps doing to you both. There she is, another child at work in the vineyard. The Father beams, and so do you. That’s NA in action. Two-thousand years and counting, and bit by bit the worldwide den of robbers is being punctuated by the sound of prayer. To this day some of it continues to fall from the repentant lips of tax collectors and prostitutes, and every so often, to all but Jesus’ surprise, a chief-priestly type chimes in. Who would have thought such a miracle could happen? Christ’s right makes might indeed.