

*When Jesus 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?" 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. 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?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." 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.*

*"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 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. 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.*

In my sermon two weeks ago I noted that when we read Paul's statements about government in Romans 13, it is important to remember that the Roman emperor at that time was the infamous Nero. This morning, as we approach the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation this month and Martin Luther has been a focus of attention all year, we should be aware that there was a infamous king who was a contemporary of Luther who played an important part in the Reformation -- Henry the VIII, king of England. If you can hang with me for a moment, I'll see if I can't make a connection between some trivia about Henry & Luther and our gospel reading.

For those of us whose memories stretch back to the mid-60's, it's hard to hear the name Henry VIII and not think of the Herman's Hermits song, "I Am Henry the Eighth I Am." If you've never heard that song, consider yourself blessed, for the fact that this song was #1 on the charts in 1965 is an embarrassing blemish on the history of our country. But other than the name, that song has nothing to do with Henry VIII, king of England from 1509-1547. Henry is perhaps best known for two things. The first is the soap opera of having six wives in an attempt to father a male heir to the throne. The second thing he's known for is related to the first: because Henry was a devout Roman Catholic, he could not divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon (a region of Spain) but had to receive an annulment from the church. The pope in 1527 was Clement VII. When Henry's request for the annulment came, Pope Clement was under house arrest, held by the army of Charles V of Spain, who was also emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. This is the same Charles who summoned Martin Luther to the Diet of Worms in 1521 and declared Luther to be a heretic whom anyone could arrest and put to death. Since Catherine of Aragon was aunt of Emperor Charles, it was not prudent for the pope to offend the man who had him under arrest by ruling against his aunt, so Clement refused to grant the annulment. Henry responded by saying, "if you won't bend the rules for me, I'll make my own rules" and he forced the Roman Catholic churches of England to break with Rome and form the Church of England, with himself as the highest authority.

Here's the trivia part: Henry was a devout Roman Catholic prior to this break, and in 1521, the same year as the Diet of Worms, he wrote a theological treatise entitled, "Declaration of the Seven Sacraments Against Martin Luther." This is just a year after Martin Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X, and one of the things Luther had advocated was that only baptism and communion of the seven rites in the Church met the criteria for being a sacrament. Pope Leo was so pleased with Henry's defense of church doctrine that he gave Henry the title, *Fidei Defensor*, Defender of the Faith. Thirteen years later, after Henry broke with Rome, another pope withdrew the title from Henry, but Henry soon had the English Parliament restore the title to him and to this day, one of the titles of the king or queen of England is "Defender of the Faith" and the initials "F.D." for *Fidei Defensor* are on all British coins next to the queen's image and have their basis in Henry's treatise challenging Martin Luther.

I looked up this trivia about the title "Defender of the Faith" because it seems to me that this is the role the chief priests and elders are playing in our gospel reading. Let's not fall into the false assumption that the chief priests and elders are the bad guys. These men had the responsibility to make sure that worship in the temple was carried out properly; that sacrifices were made in accordance with the Torah, the law of Moses; and that the temple and its grounds were maintained and respected. That was a big responsibility and they were carrying out that responsibility to the best of their ability.

One day Jesus comes into Jerusalem. As Matthew tells the story, this is the first time in his public ministry that Jesus had been in Jerusalem. The chief priests and elders had no doubt heard about Jesus, that he was drawing large crowds up in his home area of Galilee to the north because of his teaching and healing, but this was maybe the first time they had actually seen Jesus. Jesus makes a statement by his method of entrance into town, riding a donkey.



ELIZABETH II  
DEI GRATIA REGINA  
FIDEI DEFENSATRIX  
Elizabeth II,  
by the grace of God,  
Queen  
and Defender of the Faith

Riding a donkey is hardly unusual. Donkeys were common animals and people rode them all the time. But Jesus and his followers knew that the prophet Zechariah (9:9) spoke of a king entering Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowd had gotten worked up, proclaiming Jesus as “Son of David”, a code title for the messiah, the one who would one day throw off Roman rule and re-establish the kingdom of Israel.

The very first thing Jesus does after this dramatic entrance into Jerusalem is go to the temple. But rather than take part in a prayer service or offer a sacrifice as one would expect, Jesus causes a huge scene by overturning the tables of the moneychangers and driving out those who were selling things. Let’s be clear that these moneychangers and sellers were not bad people who were doing something evil. They were providing a service to the thousands of pilgrims that were coming to Jerusalem for Passover. Those who traveled 50 or 100 miles to sacrifice a dove or a lamb no doubt were very appreciative knowing that they didn’t have to transport that dove or lamb their entire journey, but could purchase one in the temple courtyard. And moneychangers were necessary because the temple had its own currency and the temple tax had to be paid in that currency, so visitors needed a place where they could exchange Roman coins for temple coins, much like when we travel to another country we need to exchange our American dollars for Euros or yen. These moneychangers and sellers were providing a service that had been going on for generations.

Imagine how the chief priests and elders felt when Jesus started overturning tables and yelling that there was something ethically wrong about these practices that had been going on as long as anyone could remember. Then Jesus proceeded to heal a few people and announce that their sins are forgiven. By forgiving sins, Jesus was making another attack on the authority of the chief priests and elders, because forgiveness is part of their role at the temple. Who does this Jesus think he is? So they ask him, “By what authority do you do these things?”

I don’t think we should be surprised by the response of the chief priests and elders. They are defenders of the faith, making sure that worship is done in proper order and that doctrine is sound. They are no different than religious authorities today. But there are two types of authority – human authority, which is concerned with power, and divine authority, which is concerned with truth. Like the chief priests and elders of Jesus’ day, religious authorities are concerned with both power and truth and sometimes we don’t do a very good job of distinguishing them and keeping them separate.

If you read the gospel accounts about Jesus, one thing that Jesus seldom does is defend himself or defend doctrine. He is often in a position where it would be natural for him to make a defense, such as here when he is asked by what authority he disrupts the life of the temple and forgives sins, or at his trial before Pilate, but Jesus typically responds to a question of authority with another question or by telling a story. He doesn’t defend his power so much as he asserts truth, which is his authority.

Many years ago *Look* magazine asked 25 different people what it means to be a member of their particular faith. G. Nelson Ruff, the editor of *The Lutheran* magazine at that time, was asked, ‘Do Lutherans believe that theirs is the only true faith?’ He answered, ‘Yes [they do], they just don’t believe that they’re the only ones that hold it.’” I think that is a great response about authority, for it asserts truth without defending power.

All too often in the history of the church, right down to the present day, when church leaders get involved with questions of authority and in trying to “defend the faith” they end up defending their own power rather than proclaiming truth. I don’t want to imply that it is easy to distinguish the difference between human authority and divine authority, because it’s not. That’s because God doesn’t speak to us directly. God speaks to us through the means of Word and Sacrament. That Word of gospel and law is spoken through human mouths. The sacraments of Baptism and Communion are administered by human hands. Those who speak the Word and administer the Sacraments necessarily are accorded some human authority – power. The Word they speak and the Sacraments they administer have divine authority – truth. Because power and truth are always intermingled for religious authority, it is important when “defending the faith” for church leaders and denominations to always ask the question, “Are we defending ourselves – our traditions, our societal prejudices, our pension plans – or are we attempting to defend divine truth? And if it is divine truth we seek to defend, are our attempts to defend it really necessary? If Jesus didn’t spend a lot of effort defending the truth, maybe we shouldn’t put a lot of effort into defending it either, but simply assert the truth that God loves us and has shown his love by taking human form in Jesus, whose ministry of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation has been validated by his resurrection from the dead.”

Or as the Apostle Paul states it more eloquently in our reading from Philippians, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

That’s the truth that Jesus announces, and that is the proper authority for the church to proclaim.