Second Presbyterian Church
September 27, 2026 || Year A – Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 21:23-32

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew.

‘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?”
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.”’

For the word of God in scripture,
for the word of God among us,
for the word of God within us.
Thanks be to God.

By what authority are you doing these things?

Let's set the stage for this question from the chief priests and elders.

Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey and causes the whole city to be in turmoil.

Jesus enters the temple, overturns the tables of money changers, and cures the blind and the lame.

Jesus enters a city and a sanctuary – transforms both – and leaves their inhabitants and keepers of the status quo flabbergasted.

Jesus shakes up *what is* to create space for *what will be*, and those standing on the shaken ground ask this prophet, this rabbi from Nazareth, "By what authority are you doing these things?"

The American writer Annie Dillard died earlier this month.

Described in her obituary as "a theologian looking high and low for God,"[1] I first encountered Annie's writing during seminary in my worship and sacraments class.

In an essay from her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie reminds us of the upheaval that God's presence, power, and authority initiates in our lives.

A present, powerful authority that we tamely gather to worship every Sunday.

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/16/books/annie-dillard-dead.html

Listen now to Annie's words:

> "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?
>
> Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? …
>
> It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church;
>
> we should all be wearing crash helmets.
>
> Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.
>
> For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense,
>
> or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."[2]

Jesus enters the city on a donkey with signal flares leading the way – pointing to the sleeping god waking through incarnation.

Jesus enters the temple with crash-helmet-wearing worshippers – pointing to the waking god's overturned tables and healed people – an overturning and healing that forcefully draw them out to where they can never return.

[2] https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/170797-on-the-whole-i-do-not-find-christians-outside-of

Signal flares and crash helmets.

Jolts to our status quo.

By what authority are you doing these things?

I wonder if our resistance to change – our resistance to Jesus' transformative authority crashing into us – has us coming to worship wearing straw hats, saying no thank you to life preservers, ignoring the signal flares and the bizarre mix of heaven and human that awakens among us.

And in our resistance, we question Jesus' authority.

And Jesus questions us.

"Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

And we respond, "We don't know."

Hesitant to believe the powerful alchemy of heaven and human.

Fearful of the prophetic voice that calls us to change our minds – and to bear fruit worthy of those changed minds – because the kingdom of heaven is near.

Resistance to change – even when it means new hearts and new spirits – is understandable.

We are so used to eating sour grapes and having our teeth set on edge – so comfortable in this proverb of disgust and disease – that when God shakes up *what is* to create space for *what will be*, we become hesitant to engage new growth and new life.

The prophet Ezekiel even says that we are so comfortable with the proverb of sour grapes and clamped jaws that we proclaim that this way of our God – this way of new hearts and new spirits – is unfair!

But is it not *our* ways – *our* disingenuous yeses to Jesus' call to changed minds and vineyard work – that are unfair?

Is it not our ways – our remaining in death when God has no pleasure in the death of anyone – that are unfair?

Is it nor our ways – stubbornly remaining still instead of turning and living – that are unfair?

Unfair to our hearts and spirits and unfair to our God who desires us to put on crash helmets and turn toward those signal flares that lead us to life?

Our call to trust the authority of Jesus often begins with “I will not” – or in my case – an expletive.

I will never forget walking around the baptistry in a New Mexico church in 2017, hearing the Holy Spirit say, “I called you a long time ago,” and responding with “Oh, shoot.” (Except it wasn’t shoot.)

Heaven and human crashed within my soul, and instead of initially grabbing a crash helmet, I grabbed a straw hat.

The call to change our minds – to turn and live – jolts our sense of the status quo, shakes us out of complacency – and we would rather remain in the comfortable familiarity of sour grapes and clenched teeth than turn toward the kingdom of heaven that has drawn near.

So what do we think?

When we initially answer Jesus' call to turn and live with "I will not," will we later change our minds and enter the vineyard?

Or will we put on straw hats, ignore the signal flares, claim to enter the vineyard, but ultimately fail to go?

Will we join the transformed tax collectors and prostitutes, be lashed to the pews, and crash into the kingdom of heaven drawing near?

Or will we – even after seeing the transformative power that is heaven crashing into human – still fail to change our minds and believe?

When Jesus enters our city and our sanctuary – rupturing *what is* to create space for *what will be* – may we later change our minds and enter the vineyard.

May we spit out our sour grapes and release our clenched jaws.

May we turn from our unfair ways and embody our God's life-giving ways.

May we put on crash helmets – eager to be overturned and healed.