

**SERMON – OCTOBER 15, 2017**  
(19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)

**Going With the Grain—Matthew 21: 23-32**

Have you ever used a hand planer on a piece of wood? Wood has a grain, or a direction in which it naturally grew when it was still part of a tree. If you plane in the direction of the grain it involves an easy gliding motion and your finished piece is smooth. But if you go “against the grain”, thus the saying, the planer gets stuck and jammed and causes the wood to tear and splinter. It is this image that came into my awareness as I read our faith story this morning. Life has a grain to it. It’s the direction that God is going and the direction that God is growing creation. It is the way of love, acceptance, compassion, mercy and justice. It’s the way of healing. I think that’s partly what Jesus meant when he said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

In Jesus’ response to the Chief Priest’s and the elders’ question about his authority Jesus makes it clear that the religious leadership are going against the grain of life, against the direction in which God is growing creation. They are wreaking havoc, splintering people into camps—sinners and the pure, blasphemers and true believers. They are making it difficult for God’s work to be done. Jesus addresses what amounts to a turf war. First, his own right to teach in the Jerusalem Temple, the centre of Jewish religion and the domain of the high priests and second the legitimacy of his cousin John the baptist forgiving people’s sins by baptism in the Jordan River. Again, traditionally the exclusive domain of the priests.<sup>1</sup> The religious leadership feels protective of their institution and a little threatened. There is nothing wrong with feeling this way, I’m sure we’ve all had such experiences. But when they act from that place of defensiveness and fear they turn God into something that must be protected and defended from the unconventional and the non-traditional. They build a wall around God. They close themselves off to the possibility that something sacred might be happening in and through John and Jesus. They close themselves off to the possibility that the Spirit might be moving in their midst. They are blind to what God is doing through Jesus and John and in so doing they are going against the very grain of life.

So much of what is in the bible seems foreign to us, the cultural and social context is so different from our own. But this question of who can claim God’s authority has been a theme throughout the ages and today is being asked on our high definition flat screens and via social media. Many have claimed God’s authority in perpetrating some of the worst things imaginable. The Roman Empire did it, the armies of the Crusades did it, the Inquisition did it, the United Church did it in establishing residential schools, the Westboro Baptist Church does it in condemning homosexuals, Al Qaeda and ISIS do it in killing what they term “the infidels”. All these are examples of going against the grain of life, of splintering and tearing god’s creation, based on a notion of a God whose integrity must be defended against those whose lives and beliefs challenge the orthodoxy. We hear these claims to divine authority and we want to throw the concept away as a dangerous and arrogant abuse of religion. But, I think we need to re-claim it and re-enforce what it really means to act under God’s authority. As our faith story

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<sup>1</sup> William Loader, *First Thoughts on Matthew from Passages in the Lectionary: Pentecost 16*, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtPentecost16.htm>.

illustrates, figuring out whether we or anybody else is acting under God's authority comes down to a rather simple criteria.

For Jesus all legitimate authority is rooted in God and God's call, a notion with which the Chief Priests and the elders would agree. The difference between them is this: Jesus says the only way to know that someone is acting under God's authority is by the fruit of their actions. Just look at a person's life, what is the fruit that their life produces? What results from how they live? If the fruit is community, love, intimacy, justice, mercy and compassion, those things that bring us closer to God and each other, than you can be pretty sure that no matter how unconventional someone might be they are indeed acting under God's authority. That's what he tries to tell the religious leaders when they question him about John the Baptist's and his authority: He says "can't you see something profound and sacred is happening here, God worked through John the Baptist and is working through me. Dishonest tax collectors are turning honest and prostitutes are turning their lives around. These people who were once despised and shunned are returning to their communities. God is working in your midst, what more do you need to see?" Legitimate religious and spiritual authority is about cooperating with God, with what God is doing in the world. It's about going with the grain, with the ways in which God is growing and healing creation.

There are so many interests vying to wield their authority over us—governments, employers, advertisers, addictions and fears. We worship in community in part to remind ourselves that there is a deeper reality, a deeper authority in our lives. It's the authority we submit to in baptism in confirmation. It's the authority that takes over when we embrace the cycle of death and resurrection, when we lose our lives in order to gain them.

There is a grain to life, a natural order of things that leads us to God. It's not a meaningless world we inhabit, but rather a world full of God's activity. The world isn't a frightening place that we have to try to control and manipulate in order to protect ourselves from it. The world is a place of possibility where God calls us out of loneliness and isolation and into a community that is authorized by God to love and serve others. Those who act under God's authority do not destroy, they produce fruit that nourishes and builds up the human and cosmic body. To claim God's authority as a banner of self-righteous promotion that sets us apart from others is an abuse of religion. God's authority is a mantle of service and humility that draws us deeper into community and into the interconnectedness of all things, which is the very reality of God. This is the grain we follow. This is the gospel, this is good news.