

This is an unusual Gospel passage to appear in the Lectionary on the first weekend in October. Our gospel lesson is verses 23-32 in the 21st chapter of Matthew. If we looked at the beginning of chapter 21 we would see why it is an unusual lesson for the fall of the year. Chapter 21 starts off with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. That is the Palm Sunday lesson that we read the week before Easter in the spring. Soon after Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem he cleanses out the Temple of “all who were selling and buying in the temple” as they were intentionally ripping off the faithful that came to Temple to fulfill their holy day obligations. His entry, the cleansing, and his teaching seem to prompt the question we find in our gospel lesson today. In verses 23-24 of chapter 21 of Matthew we read:

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 the authority?”

Good question. Where did Jesus get his authority? The answer to this question has been addressed a couple of times in the gospel of Matthew already. We find the answer in the birth narrative in chapter one.

In verses 20 and following we read:

But just when Joseph resolved to dismiss Mary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Where does his authority come from? It comes from the Holy Spirit. Yet, Joseph has seemingly died by this time so Jesus does not make this reference to the chief priests and elders as Joseph is not present to substantiate it.

Yet, further in gospel there is a familiar narrative that points to where Jesus got his authority and that is John the Baptist. In chapter 3, starting with verse 1, we read,

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness; ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Later in chapter 3 Matthew records that John proclaims that Jesus is the one for whom he is preparing the way. John proclaims that Jesus is God’s anointed one. Jesus authority comes from God.

In response to the chief priests and elders Jesus makes reference to John. If John the Baptist is a prophet of God then his message that Jesus is the anointed one of God clearly indicates the source of Jesus' authority.

Therefore, Jesus questions those who question him to answer their own question. Jesus says to them, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" If they say "from heaven" then John's words about Jesus being the anointed one of God reveals the source of his authority. Yet, if they say it was of human origin the crowds surrounding them, who had previously gone to the river Jordan to be baptized by John, will vigorously challenge the chief priests and elders. Stuck between a rock and a hard place the religious leaders respond by saying, "We do not know."

John had the vision for who Jesus might be; the anointed one, the Messiah, the Lord. The crowds of the common folk had the vision for who Jesus might be; the anointed one, the Messiah, the Lord. The leaders in the temple had not caught that vision. Now, as we name ourselves as followers of Jesus, disciples of Jesus, as Christians we declare that we have the vision for who Jesus is; the anointed one, our Messiah and Lord. We understand that his authority did come from the Holy Spirit, God Almighty.

John the Baptist walked forward with vision. Jesus taught and reached out with vision. On our best days we walk out our doors with vision. Now I could personalize the rest of the message about discerning God's vision in our individual lives. That would be a worthy investment of our time. Yet, on this World Communion weekend I would like us to consider vision from a congregation perspective.

Our predecessors here at St. Paul developed this congregation in 1932 with vision. Successive waves of pastors and members carried out ministry in the spirit of Jesus Christ here at St. Paul with vision.

What now, is our vision? We can easily answer that with reference to our Mission Statement that reads:

*We are God's people working together
to accomplish something bigger than ourselves,
effecting change in our community,
nation and around the world,
all in the name of Jesus Christ.*

That is a good and worthwhile vision to follow. We are God's people. We work together in numerous ways. Hosting Refugee Clothes Closets is something bigger than ourselves. Hosting two refugee congregations each and every week is something bigger than ourselves.

Responding to flood and hurricane victims as we did in September through our support of UMCOR is something bigger than ourselves. As we join together in the World Communion Offering this weekend to provide scholarships for deserving but economically challenged students around the world is something bigger than ourselves. These examples of how we carry out the vision of our mission statement come from activities in the last month. Many other examples could be mentioned. We, like John the Baptist, let our vision move us into difference making mission. We, like Jesus, let our vision move us into difference making mission.

Yet, our vision must include taking intentional steps that provide sustainability so we are able to carry out difference making mission for decades to come. As we carry out our mission week-in and week-out we must compliment those efforts with a plan for the next generation doing the work of God at St. Paul UMC. If you hadn't noticed, we are getting older. We need to lay down the foundation for the next generations.

The exciting news is that we are actively living out the first phase of our vision for sustainability. One year ago we talked about developing and maintaining a balanced budget.

That seemed like “pie in the sky” talk because we had been dipping into our Foundation funds to maintain a balanced budget for years; some years \$100,000 and other years nearly \$200,000.

Yet we are a people of vision. In the spirit of John, in the spirit of Jesus, in the spirit of the first generation Christians, in the spirit those who formed St. Paul in 1932 we said “yes” to a vision for our time and place. We stated a year ago that we are going to develop and maintain a balanced budget as a first step towards a sustainable mission and ministry here at St. Paul.

How is that vision going? Through September our church budget is in the green! Through September our Child Development Center budget is in the green! In addition, our Foundation Funds have increased by over \$40,000 this calendar year and that has included new gifts of \$9,000 and \$16,000, respectively.

As we carry out our mission week-in and week-out we are complimenting those efforts with plans for the next generation doing the work of God at St. Paul UMC.

Step two toward our vision of sustainability is growing our congregation of active disciples of Jesus Christ. Step two started in the last month with the establishment a Vision Team here at St. Paul. It is a gathering of 12 people and more are welcome if you feel so called.

Their focus is to develop a connection with the people in neighborhoods that surround St. Paul Church. This is our primary mission field and may be the principal source of our future congregation as we grow into a sustainable future. We will always be a congregation with metropolitan membership but a strong base in Benson is essential. How do we serve and connect with our community and grow?

-It will take...

Prayer, observational walks, analysis of demographic materials, participation in community events, reading, conversations with the St. Paul neighbors, coaching from Great Plains leaders and God's guidance.

All of this and then some will be the work of our Vision Team. The team has met twice already and will meet twice a month until next Easter with each gathering lasting about two hours. The activities listed above will make up the agenda of the meetings. I hope the team and pastoral staff visit 5,000 homes in Benson.

Many new relationships will be established and by next Easter the Vision Team will provide a proposed “Vision for St. Paul” to us.

I ask your prayers for the Vision Team.

I ask that you volunteer to be on the Vision Team if it calls out to your heart.

God provided vision for John the Baptist. God provided vision for Jesus. God provided vision for the original disciples. God provided vision for those who established St. Paul in 1932. We know God will provide vision for who we are to be in the days to come.

Well, let’s revisit our gospel text. In it the temple leaders asked Jesus the source of his authority. He indicated that it was the Holy Spirit whom John the Baptist acknowledged and Jesus himself experienced in the midst of his baptism. His authority and vision emerged from God.

Well church, what is the source of our authority? Matthew addresses that question in the final verses of his gospel, chapter 28:16-20,

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Our authority lies in Christ. Amen.