

The Gospel of Matthew is my favorite Gospel. I think it's because it has so much in it: The birth of Christ; the Beatitudes; the Parables; the Death and Resurrection; and it all ends with the Commission to the Disciples – “Go and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” Okay, I think that last part was from the UMC Book of Discipline, but it's based on the Great Commission.

I believe we can learn a few things from today's Gospel reading and apply it to what is happening in the United States today when it comes to the questioning of governmental authority.

Matthew was written for a Jewish Christian audience and it has a Rabbinical style to it. Matthew uses the Jewish religious authorities – the chief priests and elders of the people, Pharisees and Sadducees as a caricature, or exaggeration of what is wrong with the ruling classes. Remember, King Herod is a puppet of the Roman Empire and the Pharisees and other religious rulers were stuck in following the minutiae of the law.

The Chief Priests and Elders in today's reading, certainly didn't realize the mess they were getting themselves into when they confronted Jesus. They didn't expect Jesus to turn the table on them, by playing their game.

“Okay,” he says. “I'll answer your question, but only if you answer mine first.”

At that point, they're probably thinking, “Danger, Will Robinson!” Okay, maybe not that, but you get the idea. And Jesus doesn't give them the chance to refuse – he starts right in with the question – **Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?**

“Uuuhhhh.” (Alarm Sound) This question posed a big problem for them. These religious leaders did not submit to John's baptism because it was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and in **their** view they had nothing to repent. They bore no blame, at least none for which they would seek John's baptism or Jesus' mediation. This is why they thought "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." They were trapped!!!

Then they came up with an answer that they thought was brilliant. "I don't know."

So, Jesus doesn't answer their question.

But now, He realizes he can point out to everyone the importance of John. "What do you think?" he says and proceeds to tell the parable of the two sons, concluding with, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" Well, there is only one answer – the first.

At this point Jesus compares the tax collectors and prostitutes, the sinners, as the first son. He says they may not look much like God's people when compared to you pious religious authorities (the second son), but they're going to the kingdom of God ahead of you because they saw and heard John and repented; whereas you – even though you know he was righteous, you still haven't repented.

Let's take a moment now, to think about what we're seeing with protests throughout our nation. Remember, these protests began as a result of several police officers watching George Floyd die while one of them had his knee on Floyd's neck for nearly 9-minutes. Floyd repeatedly said he couldn't breath and eventually cried out for his mother before dying. Floyd was a Black man. One of many unarmed Black men and women in America who have had their lives taken from them at the hands of local authorities. The killing of George Floyd was the final straw that caused people of all colors, including Whites, to take to the streets in protest of the injustices within our system of government against people of color. The people have begun to question the authorities about these injustices, something that is required of us throughout our scriptures.

But did you notice that today's text doesn't exclude the leaders? It doesn't slam the door of redemption in their faces. Rather, Jesus is inviting them to *rehear* John's message – "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near". Even

today, it's the same message for a similar transformation in the light of God's coming reign.

It can be a hard message to accept because we don't care to be called out on the things we know we should be doing, but we're not. Before I move on, I want to say a few things about law enforcement. I have the utmost respect for those whose calling is in law enforcement. It takes a special person to deal with the many aspects of enforcing laws in a modern society in a just and Godly way. We call on our police during all kinds of emergencies: automobile accidents, domestic disputes between neighbors and family members, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, protecting our schools, handling situations with people who are mentally ill; and the list goes on.

We expect our police officers to remain professional and the vast, majority of them do. Like any profession, it only takes a few bad people to tarnish the work of many good ones. Our police officers try to keep their emotions in check while dealing with a variety of emotionally charged situations throughout their workday.

As humans, when we or a colleague do something wrong, we may try to pass the blame – it's because of **this** thing or **that** person. Pastor Bruce Modahl writes in Christian Century magazine that "the blame game is about being in the right, being righteous. But it's a game no one wins."

There are some within law enforcement who abuse their powers to enforce laws unjustly. And there are protesters who think destroying public and private property is justified in their fight for justice. Both sides are wrong.

Trying to blame others for our own faults is sinful, and it puts us at odds in our relationships with others, with God – even with ourselves. The question that Jesus asks at the beginning of the parable becomes a trap for us, "What do you think?... Which of the two did the will of his father?"

In Chapter three of Matthew, John doesn't want to baptize Jesus, but Jesus said, "**Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all**

righteousness." Pastor Modahl reminds us that "Jesus submits to John's baptism in order to line up with all those who accept their blame and acknowledge their need for God's grace. And there *HE* is, God's grace in the flesh."

We blame others because we are filled with guilt and anger and we want to get rid of it. Jesus says, "Give it to me. If you have to blame someone, blame me and only me. I'll take all you've got." And he carries all our blame to his grave. Then rising to new life, he absolves us; he pronounces us free. This is the flow and rhythm of the baptized life.

There is a German proverb that says, "God gives, but we must open our hand." I urge you to open your hand; open your heart to the way of Jesus.

Amen.