

Scripture Reading: Matthew 21: 23-32 *New Revised Standard Version*

The Gospel According to Matthew, Chapter 21, Verses 23-32

21:23 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?"

21:24 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.

21:25 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?'

21:26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet."

21:27 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.

21:28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

21:29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went.

21:30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

21:31 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.

21:32 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.

Reflection "As She Taught Me to Say"

Minister David Jones

This afternoon, I am going to be ordained. I understand that Rev. Mick Comstock has a substantial sermon to offer us as part of our ordination service. I know that he is preaching partly from our scripture reading today, which revolves around this question of Jesus' authority. So, I won't even try to preach on the same text as Rev. Mick. Instead I want to use this space in our service to share a few words about Rev. Linda, my pastor in Jacksonville, who will offer an opening prayer in the ordination service and who will lead us in prayer at that crucial moment during the service when you and those present in the sanctuary are invited to symbolically lay on hands---to make my ordination official. I thought it would be helpful for you to know a little more about Rev. Linda and especially about what she has meant to me.

Along the way to this day I have met many ministers, lay and ordained. There are four ordained ministers that I want to acknowledge this morning. It's worth noting, I think, that all four are women. First, there was Rev. Arlyce, who welcomed me into her church in my hometown, while I was home from grad school for (Canadian) Thanksgiving. Very quickly she affirmed my emerging sense of call to ministry. She could have had her doubts about me, as someone who hadn't grown up in the church, whose sense of call was so fresh. But she met me where I was, she didn't dwell on anything except the content of our meeting, and she recommended me for seminary. Then there was Rev. Alexa, who made me feel like a partner of hers during my student ministry at her church in Toronto; she taught me, among many things, the importance of paying attention to and honoring the details of ministry, and the immense value in developing good habits. Most recently, I owe a tremendous amount to Rev. Ute, who is the manager of Spiritual Services at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield and was my educator for my Clinical Pastoral Education. Rev. Ute helped me see that, far more important than thinking or writing or saying the right thing, we should strive to embody the right thing. She taught her students to listen with curious and caring ears, to learn what that right thing *to be* for another is, in each new encounter.

But it is Rev. Linda--who you will see and hear today--who has been my closest companion on this path to ordination.

When I moved to Jacksonville, Florida, Caity was already there, and had already joined a small, open and affirming church called Riverside United Church of Christ. When I arrived, I met with Rev. Linda. Rev. Linda struck me immediately as a warm and courageous person, and she invited me not only to be "in care" at her church as I sought ordination in the Florida Conference, but really to take on a role right away, to begin my own ministry alongside hers. Rev. Linda and I met once a week for coffee for the better part of 3 years, and each visit seemed to bring new trust and new insight into the Spirit's work at our little church in Jacksonville.

Rev. Linda has deep Jacksonville roots. She grew up in a Presbyterian church. At a young age she sensed a call to ordained ministry, but at that time she was told it wouldn't be possible, because women weren't invited to serve their church in that role. Years later, when mainline churches had for some time accepted women as ordained ministers, Rev. Linda was denied again; at that time, the Presbyterian church would ordain women but not gay women.

For almost 20 years now, Rev. Linda has been the minister of the church that she herself started in Jacksonville, a church that quickly earned the proud reputation of being genuinely open and affirming at a time and place where that was a very hard road to travel. People from every Christian denomination flocked to her church, where they knew--they trusted--that they could be who they were, could be who God made them to be, and would no longer be forced to choose between taking an unsettling place in a hostile church or leaving the church altogether. At Riverside United Church of Christ, people could truly belong. But establishing one place to belong was only the beginning of the congregation's work together. Rev. Linda led her congregation into playing an active and very visible role in lobbying for the passage of a human rights ordinance in the city, that would protect the city's LGBTQ+ residents from discrimination in the workplace or in housing.

In a very Christian part of the country, the city of Jacksonville, slowly but surely, has been transformed thanks in no small part to the courageous efforts of these Christians. Their courage provoked reaction, as courage always does; their church facade was frequently vandalized. And of course the fight goes on to this day. While Caity and I were members of the church, Riverside UCC was a place where we could lament and condemn and fight back against hate crimes perpetrated against black trans women in the city. The struggle for the liberation of LGBTQ continues across the country; in Jacksonville, at Riverside UCC, that struggle has been strategically enjoined with the struggle for black lives and the struggle for police accountability. Sometimes all it takes is a spark; Rev. Linda has been that spark for justice in Jacksonville.

Now, we might think that a woman who was excluded from ordained ministry, and who has since built a ministry around fighting for justice, might demur at being called a Christian. But actually more than anything else, Rev. Linda taught me to be unapologetic about my Christian faith. I didn't grow up in the church, despite my parents' efforts, and Canada is not a particularly church-going place, and nor is my generation anywhere very committed to faith traditions. I remember that the biggest hurdle in many ways to my pursuing ministry was accepting that I was religious, accepting that I did have a Christian perspective. I remember being very unsure about how to explain this to my friends. But Rev. Linda brought me around. Being unapologetic is very different from being dogmatic. Being unapologetic is more like an orientation, a posture, an inner confidence that safeguards the divine spark that is always there beneath our ideas, always there beneath our beliefs, beneath our actions. That spark is there before us and it will be there forever after us, when God's joy is complete.

Becoming unapologetic is also crucial to ministry. It allows us to go to church and to pray and even to preach not as someone afraid of getting it wrong but rather as someone afraid of keeping silent. And I don't mean this only in a moral way, in the sense that we all have a

responsibility to speak up when something is wrong. I also mean that if we never speak up, if we never act in a real, measurable way, we will never really learn what works and what doesn't. Organizing for justice is something you have to do by trial and error, because every community, every setting or context, every history is different--or at least it is understood differently. So, you can't just build a ministry in the sanctity of your own mind or even only in your own heart. You have to *do* it, in the world; you have to do it with others. Love itself is material, after all; it is something we do at the Table, with a place set for all. Or it is what you do for an aging parent or a child or a spouse or true friend; you offer help when it is needed, you provide food if you have it to provide. Love does not float in the sky but rather resides in us. It either thrives through our relationships, through our society, or it is diminished through our relationships and through our society.

I learned from Rev. Linda that, by keeping our inner confidence, by trusting completely in that divine spark, we are then free to seek and to ask questions without fear of the answers we might discover. The answers, or the absence of a clear answer, might change everything, it might lead us into entirely new ideas and beliefs and down paths we never knew existed. Even if what we discover leads us away from what we always wanted, what we thought we had always known--so long as we remain unapologetically faithful to the spark--we will have the right to follow our discoveries wherever they lead. In this way we can actually advance toward God together, no matter what the mainline church might decide about our gender or our sexuality; the divine spark is there as God's will, not the Church's.

Rev. Mick is going to explore the question our scripture poses: namely, "by what authority" are we doing the things that we do? I am really looking forward to his sermon, and I am grateful that he will be present in our sanctuary to deliver it, for all of us to see and hear on Zoom. But as I have been thinking of Rev. Linda and her wife Susan this weekend, there is at least one dimension to this question that is answered best of all by their ministry. So long as we are each unapologetic about

who we are--unapologetic about being a woman, unapologetic about being a gay woman, unapologetic about being a child of God; unapologetic about the spark within, unapologetic about the love that alights on us all, unapologetic about our gratitude for this life, our fidelity to God and so our fidelity and bond with all things--by the authority of this way of grace--a way that does not judge, that does not persecute, that does not set down iniquities between us or divide us, but always seeks reconciliation, always seeks peace, justice, and equality--by the grace given to the people of Jacksonville by Rev. Linda, we will be prepared to answer, that we do the things that we do by God's own will, which has only ever been, and only ever will be, love itself.

As she taught me to say,

Alleluia, and amen!