

Bible Study for September 17, 2026

Text for Sunday, September 27, 2026

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 21:23-32

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

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.' ²⁹ He answered, 'I will not,' but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same, and he answered, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. 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. 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.

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"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

Jesus is teaching in the temple when the chief priests and elders approach him with a question that has deeper meaning than what we see on the surface. The chief priests and elders aren't asking who told Jesus that he can teach in the temple; rather, they are asking Jesus to prove that he is who he says he is, or who Jesus' followers say that he is.

The chief priests and elders are asking Jesus to prove himself, to prove who he claims to be, to prove that he has the authority to teach and to heal, to prove who he says he is.

For many of us, at one time or another, we have experienced similar questioning. For many of us, we have experienced the pain of having our identity questioned, our right to exist, our right to do what we are called to do.

To have our identity questioned, to have our authority questioned, to have our ability questioned, is not something that we should have to go through, yet it happens more often than we would like to think. When who we are is being questioned, we are being asked to prove ourselves to someone else. Oftentimes, we are being asked to prove ourselves to someone who isn't interested in listening to our stories; they are more interested in telling us who they think we are.

Having to explain ourselves is exhausting work; it is vulnerable work, and it is often fruitless work. Even when we share our stories, we share our scars, we share our truths, and there are people out there who choose to not believe us.

This isn't the first time Jesus' identity and authority have been questioned, and we know it's not the last time he faces this line of questioning from religious leaders. Jesus doesn't provide a direct answer to their question; instead, he turns the tables and asks them about John's baptism. The chief priests and elders wrestle with the answer; they are stuck between the truth and what they are willing to acknowledge as the truth. They are trying to find the answer that will prove what they believe is right, even if it means refusing to acknowledge the truth.

Jesus knows what they are trying to do; he knows that no matter what he says, they will not believe him. Jesus knows who he is, even when those around him refuse to understand that.

**We do not have to convince everyone else in order for our identity to be real.
Our identity is not dependent on someone else's ability to understand us.**

But what happens when our identity isn't the identity that is being questioned?

After having his authority questioned, Jesus follows up with a story about two sons. The father goes to each of the sons and tells each son to go to work in the vineyard for the day. The first son tells his father no; he doesn't want to but later changes his mind and goes to work. The second son tells his father yes, yet he never went. Which of the two sons did what the father asked?

Jesus isn't asking us to choose between a son who said no and a son who said yes. Jesus is asking us to look beyond what someone says and look at what they actually

do. What matters isn't simply the answer we give, but whether our lives reflect that answer.

The ones who questioned Jesus' authority have already decided who other people are. They have already decided who is righteous and who is not, who belongs and who doesn't. They have decided that the tax collectors and prostitutes, the very ones that Jesus calls out as entering God's kingdom first, are not worthy.

The tax collectors and the prostitutes are responding to John's call and turning toward God. They are being transformed by God's love as they respond to the call. Yet the religious leaders could not, or would not, look beyond their past to see who God was calling them to be.

Sometimes it's hard to see past someone's history, sometimes we can only see what they have done or said in the past, and we have let that become the complete story of who they are. Sometimes it's easier to hold onto an old version of someone because it is the version that we understand.

For many of us, this is a familiar experience. Someone may remember the person they thought we were, the name and pronouns we once used, the way we once presented ourselves, or the life they expected us to live. Even when we tell them who we are now, they may continue to see us as we once were. To not be seen for who we are today, for who we are becoming tomorrow, is painful.

Even when others cannot, or will not, see who we are today and who we are becoming, doesn't mean our identity isn't valid or true. "Even when others refuse to see us for who we are or refuse to look beyond our past and hear our story, who we are is still who we are."

Jesus' identity is questioned, yet he remains firm in his words and actions because he knows who he is and what he is called to do.

There will always be people who question our identity, there will always be people who don't believe us when we tell them who we are. Yet, even when others don't see us for who we are and who we are becoming, God sees us and claims us beloved.

The identity we hold in God is not one we have to prove or one we have to explain. It is one that we receive freely because of who God is and the work that God is continuing to do in the world. We don't get to decide who is and who is not worthy of God's love. And we don't get to decide who God is still calling someone to become.

You are God's beloved. You are called and claimed as a child of God. Your identity is true, and no one can change that.

Questions:

1. What prevents us from recognizing God's work in the world?
2. Why can it be difficult to trust someone when they tell us who they are, especially when their identity challenges what we previously believed?
3. What does it mean to you to be called God's beloved, especially when other people do not recognize or affirm who you are?
4. Where have you seen God transforming someone's life in a way that surprised you?
5. What would it look like for a church community to trust people when they tell us who they are?
6. How might this passage challenge us to think differently about who is welcomed, believed, and trusted within the church?
7. Who is someone you may need to see differently—not because they have become someone else, but because you may need to let go of an old understanding of who they are?