**Homily for OCTOBER 1, 2023 Matthew 21:23-32 “The Authority to Change”**

When Jesus 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?” 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. 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?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” 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. “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. 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. 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.

His name is Brandon Leake. He is a dad, a husband, and an English teacher from Stockton, CA. And Brandon beat out all the great singers and magicians and dancers and circus artists in the country to be the winner of America’s Got Talent a few years ago, in 2020. And he *did* this by – are you ready? Reciting poetry. But not just any poetry…you see, Brandon is black, and grew up in the spoken word tradition, the tradition that poetry is not for dusty, rarely-read books but for live performance, with drama and wit and desire to change the listeners hearts. By sharing his truth with oddly rhymed couplets and by creating graphic, compelling images, he deeply touched the hearts of his international audience, who voted him the million-dollar winner. Of course, we Methodists are not strangers to the power of the artful spoken word, and so I would like to address today’s text, as near I can, in the way that Brandon Leake would proclaim it…

**Envision now the Temple; and see Elder, Priest, and Pharisee,**

**most upset by Jesus’ preaching, over-reacting, overreaching,**

**they question his authority.**

In response, *he* asks a question, which calls for their precise reflection

upon the works of John, his cousin, who baptized many hundred dozen,

at the Jordan’s intersection.

**“John’s work”, he asked, “I need to know, was it from God, or just a show?”**

**And thus, their thinking does he tickle, and puts them all in such a pickle,**

**they cannot tell which way to go.**

“If we say, “God”, we’d be deranged, for then he’d ask why *we’d* not changed,

and followed into holiness the many thousands John *did* bless

through his demeanor strange.”

**But if we say, “it’s just an act”, we fear the crowds he *did* attract,**

**who felt, despite the pressing swarm, that their own hearts *were* strangely warmed…if we discount them, they’ll attack.”**

And so, they said, we cannot tell if his pure power from heaven fell;

and Jesus, laughing up his sleeve, but likely also quite relieved,

refuted their demand to tell where *his* authority did dwell.

**Instead, he offered, for conjecture, a story of familiar texture.**

**A vineyard owner with two kids, who calls upon the boys, and bids**

**them do their chores without a lecture.**

The first, a scrappy little whelp, at first his dad declined to help,

but later, with a turning mind, unto the vines his way did find,

and labored hard, from foot to scalp.

**The second lad, though more compliant, proved to be much *less*** r**eliant,**

**for though he *said* he’d do the work, turned out to be a selfish jerk,**

**and secretly defiant.**

Which of these two, asked Jesus bold, *really did* what he was told?

For one said no, but then complied; the other, yes! but then denied.

Which son fit the father’s mold?

**They knew the answer this time ’round, and answered quick, but not profound,**

**“The first! *He* did the Father’s bidding, the second, he was only kidding.”**

**Your answer, Jesus said, is sound…**

In that case, let me ask you this, a barn door even *you* can’t miss:

How can *you,* religious all, have the unmitigated gall to criticize *my* holy call,

my spirit’s vibrant bliss?

**For my love’s proved by what I *do;* not say, prohibit, or eschew;**

**I’m in the mix! Not an onlooker! Despised tax men, even hookers,**

**reach heaven’s gates ahead of you, because their faith is what they do!**

To you, John must have seemed deranged, his methods terse and

somewhat strange, but so effective! Such conversion!

And all ‘cause he had no aversion to telling folks they needed change!

**Just like the first son in the story, whose laziness gave way to glory,**

**they, one and all, when truth they find, think it through, and change their minds!**

**They toss out spoiled inventory…**

Two thousand years and more have passed, and churches by the score, with plastered arches and with gilded altar, find their ministries have faltered…

**All the keys we have, save one, but *that* key turns the locks of Time! And all the world’s authority, from bishop’s manse to Holy See, depends on this *one* truth, so strange: when God says change your mind, you change! Amen.**