

Says who? Matthew 21:23-32

Power always protects itself.

by [Gracia Grindal](#) in the [September 11, 2002](#) issue

Here's the big question: By whose authority? Who has given Jesus the power to cleanse the temple, heal the sick and forgive sins? Because it's hard for us to understand life in Jesus' time, it's also hard to understand just how fundamental his attack on the moneysellers is. By forgiving sins, Jesus is blasting away at the religious leaders of the day, members of the priestly class who have made a profitable business out of forgiveness. Should we be surprised that they respond by attacking Jesus? He's threatening their wealth and privilege. No wonder they are out for him.

It is no different today. Power always protects itself. Those of us in religious leadership are just as venal as any in the world. We speak sanctimoniously of peace and unity and shut out those who challenge our authority. We "tart up" dismissive sobriquets for our rivals, we find ways to make sure our critics don't succeed, we justify shutting them out with pious cant. As a religious professional, I've come to see more clearly over the years why Jesus had to assault the religious leadership as he did. A religious vocation is dangerous for faith. And we should make no mistake—we are just as culpable as the religious leaders of Jesus' day. The Protestant in me sometimes thinks Thomas Jefferson's recommendation isn't a bad idea for the church—there should be a revolution in every generation. Throw the bums out, get a new system, new leadership. Things couldn't be worse.

In my capacity as a seminary professor, I work with a candidacy committee. Sometimes I wonder how Jesus would have done as a candidate. Would he have made it through the credentialing committees?

Can't you see the committee's report? The candidate seems to have trouble with authority and his own authority. We recommend that he be sent to a counselor to work on these issues before he goes any further in the process. There are repeated instances of this problem in his history. He is known to have been impertinent to his

elders as far back as age 12, when he argued fine theological points with them in the temple, without any consideration for the feelings of his parents. It doesn't appear that he has really dealt with that issue yet. The CPE report also hints at the same problem: he has delusions that he battled, hand to hand, with the devil. His first sermon in his home congregation made outrageous claims for his ministry. We recommend that he take an internship. . . . Furthermore, he has anger issues with which he needs to learn to deal. It is reported that he entered a church and threw out the people selling souvenirs and candles. . . . Members of his internship committee report that he never answers questions directly, but responds to questions with questions. Worst of all, he has a way of telling jokes that are blasphemous and inappropriate for religious people.

This story is good news for all the sinners I know, but horrible news for me as a member of the religious establishment. Sinners know they need something; I am only defending something. The hard part is seeing that Jesus is against not only the people I'm not very fond of in the religious establishment, but me as well. I'm a part of it. Had I been there during the trial, the tormenting and the crucifixion of Jesus, I would have been the first to hammer in the nails. I'm a defender of the establishment, no matter how rotten I think it is.

In *The Educated Imagination* Northrop Frye comments that when he hears people wishing they could have been at Bethlehem so they could have seen the star, the angels singing, the shepherds, the babe, he realizes that he wouldn't have seen it, because he doesn't see it now. Our piety and prejudices blur our vision.

It is when Jesus gets to the story of the two sons that he twists the knife in deep. It hurts my Lutheran prejudices that it isn't what we say but what we do that matters. Where is the gospel in this story, my students will ask, trying to stretch every text over the frame of their newly acquired theological paradigm. It is hard to hear from Jesus that the preferred son is the one who *does* the right thing, not the one who *says* the right thing. But for Jesus, the faith that doesn't result in faithful action is mere talk. The truth of your commitment lives in your heart. And what you do is the best measure of what's in your heart.

In my trade, talk is the coin of the realm. We have to say it just right, get it right or we are accused of not being faithful. And as a wordsmith who cares deeply about words, I value that and respect it. But every now and then it is good to hear Jesus dig his elbow in my ribs and say, Ain't so. I want your words to speak the truth from your heart, I want you to love me and obey my commands, which are simple: Love

your neighbor as yourself. By what authority does he say this? If we don't hear it in his voice right now, we'll hear it loud and clear when this Gospel story ends. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore . . ." (Matt. 28:18).