

Living and active: Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

I often feel like a religious leader standing under judgment.

by [Mary W. Anderson](#) in the [September 23, 2008](#) issue

Like long-distance swimmers, those of us who count our Sundays by the rhythm of the lectionary need to occasionally pop our heads out of the water and get our bearings. We know the month, the day and the liturgical date. We may also know where we are in our congregational programming, especially with regard to the season of harvest and stewardship. But where are we textually? Having read along in the Gospel according to Matthew like swimmers moving methodically forward, we have just passed an important landmark.

It is Holy Monday, according to Matthew, when the religious leaders confront Jesus as he is teaching in the Temple. They want to know what gives him the right or who has given him the right to be teaching and preaching in the Temple. This is hardly unreasonable of them. They want to know: “By what authority are you doing these things?” They are referring, no doubt, to the events of Palm Sunday, but maybe also to his teachings and healings before this fateful week. I can imagine my own astonishment if, on a Sunday morning, I was confronted by a stranger who announced to me that he would be interrupting my sermon with his own preaching and that it would be better than anything I could do. I would really be thrown off guard if the interloper told me my congregation was starving to hear God’s word preached to them, but since I wasn’t doing it effectively, he needed to step in. (Something similar actually happened to a colleague of mine recently, and the stranger did indeed interrupt the worship service.) The religious authorities in the Temple must have felt the same way about what Jesus was doing—interrupting, interfering, interposing.

They ask, Who do you think you are? What are you doing here? Who has ordained you to this ministry? Jesus challenges them to a theological duel. He opens with a question concerning John’s authority to baptize and preach. Was John an agent of God’s mission or was he just a crazy guy? The religious authorities are trapped since

they are skeptics when it comes to John but know that he was a popular preacher who drew crowds. Since they are unwilling to answer, Jesus incorporates his questioners in his teaching and lays out three parables of judgment against them.

A swimmer getting her bearings will see a caution sign beginning at verse 28. We are rightly cautioned by biblical scholars to avoid hearing the judgment of these parables as a judgment against Judaism or against contemporary Jews. The religious leaders represent all who claim to be faithfully obedient to God but who are deaf and blind to God's activity in the world. In this Gospel text, those who are challenged are those who boast that they are faithful followers of the Torah but who are unable to see God at work in John the Baptist and then in Jesus. In our context, the judgment comes when our discipleship in Christ is less defined than our membership in a congregation. The authority of Jesus—who he is and what he is doing here—remains a huge question in our day. The questions in the temple are still the questions in our communities.

In order to *live by the Word* we must believe the *Word is living*. Instead, we are always looking to close the canon on God's mission in the world. We want all of our revelation in the past tense, behind us where we can look at it. We want a God who can be sent to the taxidermist and then proudly mounted on the wall. Yes, the eyes may seem to follow you across the room, but rest assured, the beast is truly dead.

To believe or even assume that God is living and active in our world is to believe that God is not finished with any of us. The religious leaders of Jesus' day do not see God at work in John the Baptist, and so it is no surprise that they also miss the incarnation. The text begs the question: What are we missing in our own contexts?

As a pastor who has spent a career serving congregations in decline along the mainline, I often feel like a religious leader standing under judgment. Are these parables aimed at the heart of my ministry? Surely. They are aimed at all of us who doubt that God can do anything new or who deny that God calls us to renewal. If we're more interested in starting a contemporary worship service in our congregation than we are in seeking justice in our community, we need to pop our heads out of the water and see where we are in the fast-running current of God's mission. If we've packed away the prophetic calls to repentance, sacrifice and reconciliation up in the attics of our new family life centers, we need to pop our heads out of the water and see where we are in the river of mercy.

The religious leaders of the gospel are any of us, in any time, who believe that God's activity is all past tense, or who believe that the Spirit has nothing new to renew in us. Pop your head out of the water and check this text against your own context.