

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32    Psalm 25:1-9    Philippians 2:1-13    Matthew 21:23-32

One of my favorite hobbies is playing board games. A passion that helped me get to know my step father over 30 years ago. A passion that introduced me to my wife Lindsay through our mutual friend's weekly board game night 14 years ago. It's often a great joy to gather around the table and compete together, especially on rainy or hot days. It may surprise you to hear that I am horrible at chess. I've played it a handful of times at camps and at Bitty & Beau's with our young people. Chess is played on a board that looks a little like a checkerboard, but it has all these different pieces: a king, a queen, knights, bishops, rooks, and pawns. The object is to capture the other side's king. When you move a piece into a position where, on your next turn, you could capture the king, you say, "Check." Then the other player must move their chess piece to keep their king safe. And when your opponent's king is not safe from being captured—you say, "Checkmate." Jesus played a kind of verbal chess with the religious leaders in our gospel reading today.

He has just ridden into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1–11) and promptly headed to the temple, where He overturned the tables of the money changers (Matt. 21:12–16). Then, after spending the night outside the city, He cursed a fig tree and is now on His way back into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:17–22). The religious leaders are furious. They know that Jesus has been teaching the people, and they want to get to the bottom of things. They want to know where Jesus has this capacity to do all that he has done and where he learned his knowledge of the scriptures. So, they ask Him, "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?"

Jesus says, "If you answer my question, then I will answer yours. Tell me: the baptism of John the Baptizer—who sent him? Where did his authority come from? From heaven, or from men?"

Now the leaders ask themselves:

If we say, "From heaven," then Jesus will say, "Why did you not believe him?" It was obvious that they did not believe John, because they had refused to be baptized by him. And if John's authority came from heaven, then how could they have refused him? That answer was a dead end. Check.

What about the other answer—that John's authority came from men? Meaning either that John simply made it up on his own, or that someone like them had sent him out to teach and proclaim. But if we say that, the people will revolt, because they believe John was a prophet sent by God. And even if they don't riot, they will stop listening to us. Another dead end. Check.

And so, the chief priests and elders had their answer, "We don't know." And Jesus replied, "Then neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." Checkmate.

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: September 27, 2026

By: Deacon Ben Remmert

We know that both John's authority and Jesus' authority were from heaven. It seems so obvious to us as we know the end game. And you may be wondering, how could those leaders be so blind? But people are still asking these same questions today.

There are some who teach, and many people who think, that Jesus was simply a good religious teacher. His authority came from Himself. He was a great man, they say, but only a man. But a Jesus from earth alone could not overcome death. And only God has the authority to forgive sins. If we are to see and know Jesus as the Savior that He is, then His authority must come from heaven. He is not merely doing His own will; He is doing the will of God.

And sometimes we find ourselves in this game of theological chess, much like the religious leaders. Oh, we want a Jesus from heaven who will forgive us and redeem us. But if Jesus' authority is from heaven, then what He says goes. Some of his tough teachings of loving our enemies and turning the other cheek, a detachment from wealth and comfort, and radical discipleship of denying oneself. We don't get to do whatever we want, wherever we want, whenever we want. To face a Jesus from heaven is to face God. And knowing that we are facing God can terrify us.

Just as those religious leaders looked only to themselves and not to the people they are called to serve (as Jesus calls them out in his parable today), we, too, look for a way out. We want to switch the game from chess to checkers. "King me! King me!" We may be tempted, at least for the moment, to switch to a Jesus from earth—a Jesus who has no authority over us. A Jesus who doesn't confront our thinking, or our politics, or our habits. Because a Jesus with no heavenly authority will not get in our way. But now we have a Jesus who cannot save us. He cannot rescue us from sin. He cannot make us whole. Check. And checkmate.

Dear ones, it is game over. But in a better way. In Baptism, we were baptized into the death of Christ. And being united to His death, we are united to His resurrection. In the Holy Eucharist, we taste of His death. For Paul writes that when we do this, "we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again." Having tasted of His death, we also partake of His resurrection.

The world is on a checkerboard: red and black squares, running and jumping, trying to be their own king. But we are on a different board. We are on the chessboard. It looks similar, but it is noticeably different. The battle has been fought and won. Our lives will look different from those of the world as we love differently, serve differently, forgive differently, and when we die, we will rise. For Jesus is in control with authority from heaven. Authority both now and in the world to come. Because the One who has this heavenly authority is the One who died for us. The One who was buried for us. The One who rose for us. And the One who will come again for us. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**