First Congregational UCC
September 27, 2026
Pastor Nick Hatch
Matthew 21:23-32; *“Whose Authority?”*

Let us Pray:

God of Heaven and Earth, give us humility in repentance and fidelity to your Living Word, you son, Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the meditations upon our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We had just finished Peter Thiel’s Celebration of Live Service yesterday, and I stood in our narthex visiting with church members. One of his family members took a step forward, and with tears in her eye she said, “Pastor, that was such a beautiful service.” She took a moment and clutched her wet Kleenex, gathering herself for the rest of what she wanted to say.

Taking a breath, she continued “I have been to many funerals lately, but this one, this one was different. It was hope-filled and uplifting. I often come away feeling less hopeful and sad because there is so much focus on sin and death. But today I was invited to be sad and be hopeful. I just wanted to say thank you for reminding me of God’s presence and helping me see this even more clearly through Peter’s life.”

“You are very welcome, what we do is called A Celebration of Life service very purposefully: we celebrate the gift of life given to us through the life,

death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, I am glad you can mourn Peter and take joy in the life-giving hope we know as God's people. Because it is one and the same story."

Now officially in the UCC Book of Worship we are given a template for *A Service of Memorial and Thanksgiving.* But unlike more rigid traditions ours gives wide latitude to the church and pastor officiating a memorial or funeral service so that we are free to craft a service to reflect the unique life of the deceased, the grief of the community present, and our own congregations' theological convictions.

So, we offer A Celebration of Life worship service.

It's intended to be personal; like God's love for us. We gather to comfort one another and hear the hope of Scripture. We offer praise and gratitude to God for God's presence shown forth through the stories and life of the deceased. And above all, we proclaim the authority of Jesus Christ in all things, saying that in life and death, we are held securely by God's love who shepherds us through the birth, life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are not the only church to worship in this way. In fact, many of the words - they are not my own. They are from the UCC Book of Worship. Yet as the Spirit works to create these moments of worship, I hope one thing becomes very clear: The life we celebrate isn't first and foremost the deceased; the life we celebrate is maker of heaven and earth whose word became flesh and dwelt among us, Our Redeemer. Through his Resurrection we have every reason for hope and every cause to celebrate.

Because it is by the authority of Jesus Christ we gather to do these things.

And it is this question of authority which brings us to our Gospel lesson from Matthew today.

This conversation between a marginal Jew and Jewish priests takes place in the Jerusalem temple. There the priests clearly stood in widely recognized and culturally validated authority, which had been handed down by Moses through scripture. Also don't forget, just the day before Jesus had entered the city on a donkey, headed to the temple, the center of civic life, where he overturned tables; making the lame, blind and children full of glee. The priests were already primed to be alarmed and offended.

The chief priest cut to the core asking, "By what authority do you do these things?" Jesus being a good rabbi, answered their question with a question.

And out of all the biblical characters to align himself with, Jesus chooses John the Baptist. A strange man who wandered the wilderness eating locusts and honey. A marginal character through which the divine Holy Spirit not only proclaimed the coming Messiah, but anointed Jesus in Baptism. John the Baptist, who later would be murdered for challenging the accepted authority of his day.

But lest we confuse the gravity of the two: John spent his time defying the political-divine authority at a distance in the desert; Jesus would come into the cities and do the same, then into the nexus of the community - the temple itself, Here the power of God, the organization of commerce, the design of their religious institution, and the beliefs of the people which held it all together - were inseparably intertwined and personally complex.

The priests argued saying “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 Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

The question of *By Whose Authority* is one that weighs heavily upon all our human hearts, isn’t it?

To what authority are we subject too and sacrifice for? God? Country? Nature? Culture? Self?

By whose authority would dare cultivate celebration in hopeless times, reassurance in broken promises, overwhelming gratitude in the death of a loved one?

Jesus, like John, was less concerned with identifying his authority or claiming the power; Jesus was concerned about the disposition of the hearts of those he served, including the priests. He wanted them to offer them the gift of discerning *a way* to the Living Truth which he offered.

Then Jesus’ words come swiftly and unmistakable: “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you, because they believed him, but you did not change your minds and believe him.”

But you did not - change. You remained convicted through your positions of power and authority and could not follow the will of the Father or see the righteous prophet in John the Baptist. Your power, your wealth, your friendships, your fine robes, the channels of commerce which had turned the temple into something other than a house of worship, were unyielding

and overwhelming. And so, they did not change their minds, and they did not believe him.

Just as there was no room for Jesus to be born at the Inn, there was no room for repentance in the hearts of those present.

In the New Testament, the Greek term “metanoia”, meaning “repent” appears over fifty times and generally means “change of mind.” Here is where it gets really interesting, on six occasions a special variation occurs “metameloma” which carries the nuance of “regretting” or “carrying remorse.”

These are the words used by Matthew in our text.

You will not change your mind, and you have no regrets nor remorse for you are truly not repentant.

In speaking of the social-political structure of Nazi Germany, which also eventually cost him his life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said:

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

I wonder, do we have the humility to practice repentance as an act of welcoming to the living and incarnate Christ?

It’s important to note also that in Jesus’ story, the lack of repentance of the second son, came with a lie.

“I will go Sir,” he said. But he did not go. Perhaps his was more of question of appearance than faithfulness. But such is the human heart: willing to deceive ourselves and remain willfully self-assured in the context which serves us most readily. Forfeiting the costliness of the Resurrection for a culturally palatable, cheapened Grace which asks little and overturns most nothing.

Choosing to believe in God, and genuinely live a life of discipleship, takes courage. Because it means we gladly invite God to enter into our lives and challenge us when we fall short of the genuine faithfulness. This way is not easy, especially in a world that worships its own power, pursues endless false idols, belittles humility and hides regrets.

But I believe that ultimately God’s path is the only one which offers us lasting freedom from sin and despair; the true freedom for hope, justice righteous in everlasting-eyes, unfailing truth, and abundant life.

May our lives be such a bold a prophetic God-song that people cannot help to ask, “By whose authority, do you do these things?” And in turn may the Holy Spirit bring forth an apostolic Celebration of Life where all celebrate the gift of life given to us through the life, death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What do you think?

Amen.