

I speak to you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There are many firsts in life. The first word, the first day of school, the first job. In the life of a seminarian, there is the first sermon -- which is a first step of speaking publicly and presumably with authority, on God's word. So, today, dear people of St. Thomas, I appreciate that you're here, as I take my first step as a preacher.

We're familiar with Jesus's parables – think of the lost sheep, the prodigal son. But these two parables from the Gospel of Matthew are more like riddles than parables -- and they are all about Jesus, God come to earth to question the authority of the status quo.

I once had a black and white bumper sticker that said just that, Question Authority. But it wasn't religious. I was in high school when the first Star Wars movie came out. My friends and I loved it. We saw it seven times in the first month, at the walk in and the drive in. We cheered for Luke Skywalker and the rebels as they questioned the authority of Darth Vader and the Galactic Empire.

I was so enamored with the fight for justice in that galaxy far far away, I put that bumper sticker – Question Authority -- on the chrome fender of my old Chevy Vega. Fast forward a few decades and here I am, talking about the original Luke Skywalker, the son of God who fights the eternal fight for good over evil.

There are a ton of images of Jesus in culture and religion. It's football season – believe it or not, pandemic or not – so this brings to mind Touchdown Jesus, at the University of Notre Dame. Behind the altar of the National Shrine in Northwest Washington, there is mosaic that some describe as the "Angry" Jesus. As I prepared for today, I came to think of the Jesus we worship, especially the Jesus in today's Gospel, as the Rebellious Jesus.

He is a fierce rebel and he has a cause – that cause is love for us and for the world.

Let's remember where we are at this point in Matthew's gospel. The day before today's verse is Palm Sunday. Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the people hailed him, with branches and Hosannas, as the Son of David. He threw the city into turmoil.

You might think, after that welcome, Jesus would rest for a bit. Nope. He keeps moving. He goes to the Temple and drives out the moneychangers who were defiling 'his father's house.'

After that, he spends the night in Bethany, but he comes back to the Temple first thing in the morning -- which is where we pick up in verse 23, in this confrontation with the chief priests and elders.

They ask Jesus, "Who gave you the authority to do these things?" referring to his cleansing of the Temple the day before. Just like Jerusalem, the elders are in turmoil, because they are facing this young, scruffy rabbi, who they fear is so beloved by the crowds that he could cause an insurrection.

The elders know they've got trouble. In fact, when Matthew describes them as "chief priests and elders *of the people*," "of the people" is ironic, because the people have lost faith in them. They see them as tools of the Roman state, not as wise rabbis.

This question of authority is crucial, because the elders believe they have the authority, and they want – they must -- discredit Jesus. But Jesus doesn't answer their question directly. He doesn't say where his authority comes from. He doesn't acknowledge their earthly system and he's not there for a political insurrection.

His cause is bigger, it's cosmic, it's galactic. It's us and the kingdom of God. So, he answers their question with a question, do they think the baptism of John was by human or heavenly hands?

It's our rebellious Jesus giving as good as he gets. It's no mistake that Jesus asks about John the Baptist, another fierce rebel, another voice crying in the wilderness outside the city walls.

The elders can't answer yes or no to Jesus's question and keep their authority, so they answer with a half-hearted "we do not know."

While the question of authority is critical for the elders, to Jesus, that's not the point. He isn't asking for a right or wrong answer. He's asking for no less than transformation through faith – because that's what our Rebellious Jesus wants to do, he wants to transform us and the world.

Now, although it's already been a busy morning, Jesus doesn't rest. He goes on to challenge the elders with the parable of the two sons.

A father asks his two sons to go work in the vineyard. The first refuses but ends up going. The second agrees to go, but then doesn't. When Jesus asks the elders which of the sons did the will of his father, you can picture their smug smiles. They're thinking, hah! What a bumpkin! They answer that of course it's the son that goes to the vineyard, because actions matter more than words.

But then Jesus changes the subject yet again, here's the riddle. He tells the elders that the tax collectors and the prostitutes –the lowest rungs of society – will go the kingdom of God ahead of them.

Why does he say this? Because he's making the point, again, that they did not believe in John, while the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. Jesus brings in John, because John is righteous, and the

elders have denied him. Through this parable, Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the elders, that they are like the son who offers words, but no action.

In comparison, Jesus and John are righteous in both words and deeds. We see this in how Jesus abides with and advocates for – not the priests, the wealthy or the elites – but the vulnerable, the lowly, the tax collectors and the prostitutes.

These parables show us a fierce Jesus, a more complex portrait than the Jesus we learn about in Sunday School.

We know well the words from first Corinthians, that "Love is patient ... love is kind..." Today's readings show us that God's love can also be rebellious and fierce. When Fran gives us our closing blessing in a few minutes, we will hear that again. She'll say, "Be of good courage. Never be afraid, because God who created you, is always with you, and loves you fiercely."

I better understand now the grace of my parents' fierce love. They grew up poor and during the Great Depression, and they were adamant that my brothers and I would become independent and, ideally, successful. They didn't worry much about whether that also included "being our best selves" or personal fulfillment. If the job was honest and paid the rent, that was the place to start.

I used to complain about that, bitterly, but I took their advice and focused on earning the best living I could. Turns out, they were fierce and wise. A parent's love is like the love Jesus has for us – it is kind; it is patient, yes, and it is also fierce.

When Jesus asks the elders about John, he is asking the central question of the gospels "Who do you say I am?" His words to the elders, and to us, are clear. He isn't looking for compromise. He will do whatever it takes, question whatever authority there is, to call us to faith in him.

The good news is that the God who created us believes we are worth fighting for, forever. That's a priceless gift. You might even call it our divine touchdown.

Our first job, then, is to believe that God loves us, just as we are, exactly where we are --- with our sins, our doubts and our chaos.

And our second job is to go into the world and fiercely love on another, as Christ fiercely loves us.

Amen.