

Option 3

Matthew 21:23-32

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When the girls were little, I tried to avoid asking them if they *wanted* to do something that I *needed* them to do. So no questions like “Are you ready to go to bed now?” or “You want to take a bath?” I needed the answers to those questions to be yes, and what do you do if they say no, as toddlers are apt to spout with regularity. I also didn’t want to be dictator mom, commanding them to do things right and left all day, with no room to think for themselves. So I also tried to avoid: Clean your room, get in the tub, pick up your toys. Those invited similar “no” responses anyway. What to do, what to do. I have no idea if this is the current parenting advice now, but at that time, a frequent phrase was “Give children choices.” So, ok. Child, would you like to pick up toys first, or take a bath first? Both things I needed her to do, so I would be happy with either option. She was empowered to choose her own activity. Perfect!

Anyone who has been a child or has ever met a child can probably predict what happened next. Child, what would you like to do first? Your choices are pick up toys or take a bath. Child says, loudly, “No! No toys, no bath!” and demonstrates clearly that her fully empowered choice is to jump off the couch repeatedly. Giving a child—our children, anyway—a choice between two options held no guarantee at all that the child would choose either option. In fact, it pretty closely guaranteed that she would choose none of the above as her favorite answer. As the kids have grown up, one of them in particular is gifted at seeing options that I don’t see, in a good way. Her “none of the above” spirit is reflected in creative thinking about problems and snags in everyday life. I admire that, and it’s good now. It was frustrating as all get out when I just needed her to put on her pajamas.

When I look at this passage from Matthew with this memory in the back of my mind, I see Jesus trying to invite the religious leaders to think beyond options 1 and 2, to option 3 and beyond, to “none of the above” or “both” or “neither.” And they can’t. They’re stuck in option 1 or option 2.

Jesus pushes people beyond option 1 and option 2 throughout Matthew. If we go back to the Sermon on the Mount, take for instance the “turn the other cheek” teaching. Someone slaps you. You normally think option 1 is slap them back. Option 2 is walk away and feel like a pushover. Jesus goes beyond those two

options and offers a third: turn the other cheek for them to slap. Make them think about it. How insulting do they really want to be? There are more options for handling enemies than they thought of at first.

That same dynamic is at play between the religious authorities and Jesus. This passage appears in the midst of a long section of escalating conflicts during Holy Week. The Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem was at the beginning of this chapter, then the turning over the tables incident. The conflicts and interactions with the authorities go all the way through the end of chapter 23, where Jesus exits the Temple and begins a long conversation with the disciples. Along the way, he's getting closer and closer to the cross.

As he enters the Temple on Monday, the authorities approach him as he is teaching, probably hoping to shoo him off before he does something else drastic. They ask him what is clearly an accusatory question: by what authority are you doing all this, and who gave you that authority? They think there's only two options: Jesus will either claim that he just has the authority because he said so. Or, he'll claim that some human gave him the authority. In either case, they feel confident that *they* actually are the ones with authority in the Temple, and they'll be able to overrule him and kick him out. Jesus says "none of the above" and in turn asks them a question.

Jesus's question to the temple authorities is: What about John? Was his authority from heaven or human origin? He gives them the two options, and they're stuck. If they say John's authority was from heaven, well, then, they ought to have followed John, and they didn't. But if they say John's authority was only human, then they're worried about what the crowds will do and say, because so many of them followed John and were baptized. So they come up with the worst option three they could: we don't know. We're avoiding your question, because we're afraid. And Jesus says, ok, I'm not answering your question then either.

If the authorities could have figured out an option three for the question they were supposed to answer, then they would have seen the option three for the question they had asked Jesus, which again this is me talking, I think the option 3 answer there is both. Jesus and John do what they do by both divine and human authority.

And then Jesus tells this parable. Father tells the two sons to go work in the vineyard. The first son refuses, but then later goes to work anyway. The second son says yes but then doesn't follow through. Which of the sons, Jesus asks, did the will of his father? It sure sounds like there are only two options. Are they going

to chicken out again and say “We don’t know?” Or will they take the opportunity to expand their thinking?

They answer with option 1, the first son, who said no and then went to the vineyard and worked anyway.

And then listen to what isn’t there. Jesus doesn’t say, as he does sometimes, that they have answered well. He doesn’t give them any instructions, as he does the rich young ruler. I think it’s at least plausible that after their answer, Jesus sighs internally, thinking they’ve missed the opportunity again. They didn’t take the opportunity to expand their thinking about John the Baptist. They are not able to change their thinking about Jesus himself. And they can’t figure out a way out of the parable, either. Because neither son really did the will of the father.

What Jesus says next could be taken as a response to their option 1 answer. But I don’t know that it has to be. He says, “The tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of you, because they believed John and you didn’t.” Kind of another way of saying “the last will be first and the first will be last.”

Jesus is giving them repeated opportunities to think beyond the clearcut options they’ve always lived by. Following the law or breaking the law. Abiding by the customs or disrespecting the traditions. Clean and unclean. There are more options than those. Jesus is not overly clear about this, I’ll admit, and I’ll further say that I may be wrong about this reading of this passage, more so than I usually am.

But I’ll also say that I regularly need this kind of prodding. I’m prone to option 1/option 2 thinking myself. Once I’ve thought of two options, I stop thinking. I fence in my own creativity and imagination. I don’t allow myself to be open to the Spirit leading me to all of the above, none of the above, option 3 and beyond. Maybe you recognize yourself in that same spot.

It would be good for all of us to take the time and energy and thought to ask “are those the only options” before we answer a question. It would be good for us to look for the opportunities and space to do so. It seems to me to be faithful to the way Jesus ministered, never closing the door on anyone, not even Judas, offering options and opportunities all along the way.