

Pentecost 18A October 01 2023
Matthew 21:23-32
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

When [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Let's pray: ...

Authority issues. Do you know anyone with authority issues? We live in a country that's quite anti-authoritarian in nature. Something to do with convicts I suspect. We just don't like being told what to do. Authority is the underlying theme of today's gospel. The chief priests and elders take issue with Jesus' authority. The two sons challenge their father's authority. We all have authority issues but I'm not talking about authority in the way we usually understand it.

The Greek word for "authority" in the New Testament is [ἐξουσία] eksousía, which means "delegated empowerment". Theologically, it's the authority God gives us to act to the extent that we're guided by faith.

If we apply our usual understanding of authority, the obvious question in today's gospel is whether we recognise and submit to the authority of Jesus and the Father. Yet, that question seems so obvious that I wonder whether there's something far more meaningful lying at the heart of today's gospel. It's so obvious that I believe there has to be something more going on. I believe that to consider that option as the only viable and correct answer reveals our misunderstanding of what true authority is.

More often than not we either misunderstand authority or are misled as to what authority is really about. We might understand it to be based on credentials and expertise, a thick resume, years of education, successes and accomplishments, status and reputation, or a position held in relationship to another. We might assume that authority comes from outside a person and that it's inherited by them according to their circumstances. The problem with this understanding is that some people have authority while many don't.

“Who do you think you are?” “What gives you the right to tell me what to do?” Or to use a phrase well exercised by children, “You’re not the boss of me!” That represents our usual way of understanding authority. We don’t like someone else teaching us, correcting us, or telling us what to do. We hear that in the challenge of the chief priests and elders to Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” We see it in the refusal of the two sons to go to the vineyard.

There is, however, a deeper authority issue at play in today’s gospel. That issue is our failure and sometimes our refusal to recognise, claim, and exercise the authority within us; to go to the vineyard. That’s the authority issue I believe this gospel is challenging us to contemplate today.

So, I want to push you a little on this authority issue. I want to rattle your cage and see how you react. I’m going to make a bold statement and I expect you to respond to it. Chuck rotten tomatoes, poke your tongue at me, sneer, whatever. Are you ready? Here goes. God is not the boss of you and God is not the boss of me. If you think God is the boss of you, you’ve misunderstood authority. It’s time to let go of that idea. Now I owe you an explanation.

God isn’t our boss. God is our author. Every day, God authorises us to enter into his vineyard, to act in this world with his authority and on his behalf, using the gifts he has bestowed upon each one of us through his Holy Spirit.

True authority always comes from within. It’s an internal God-given quality not a consequence of external factors. That’s what the chief priests and elders failed to understand. I think that’s why Jesus was always so cranky with the religious leaders. They chose to exchange their God-given authority for human power, which as we’re all well aware is open to abuse. That’s where things get mucked up in the world today.

In the absence of true authority, the void left will quickly be filled with power struggles. Look at the farce we call our political system. Look at the wars constantly being waged throughout the world. Look at the conflicts in your own relationships. Those are about power, not authority. Our leaders exercise power but very few exercise authority. Power is something exercised for self-interest and to abuse/control others, whereas, authority is something exercised for the benefit and interest of others.

Pope Francis spoke well in his daily homily at Casa Santa Marta in 2017 when he said: 'Jesus had authority because he served the people, he was close to persons and he was coherent, as opposed to the doctors of the law who considered themselves princes.' [1]

Think about the people who hold authority for you. They're not concerned about themselves. They don't dominate or control you. They inspire you. They build up in you, faith, hope, and trust. They expand your world, show you new possibilities, and draw from you life and gifts that you never knew were there. They cause you to re-evaluate your life, change your mind, and live differently. That sounds exactly like Jesus and it's very different from those who exercise power.

I'll always remember and give thanks for the authority that God granted Rev. Dr Erich Renner. Pastor Renner made everyone around him laugh and feel as though they were the most important people in his life. Not because he manipulated people, but by the way he exercised his God-gifted authority. His silence, listening, gentle presence, and wisdom weren't just his personality traits, they were the divine attributes in his life, gifts God had bestowed on him. And he used them to create space for me and for others, to invite us to discover our own authority, to show us the way to the vineyard of our lives.

There are people in this parish who have no leadership position, title, or theological credentials and yet they have great authority. I see it in their compassion and gentleness. I see it in the way they serve others. I hear it in the way they pray. I feel it in their love for God, myself, and others. They too show me the way to the vineyard of my life. That's what authorities do. But it's not about them. It doesn't come from them.

All authority originates in God and God shares his authority with us. The authority God shares with us is nothing less than his own divine attributes. God expresses and manifests his life in and through our lives, expanding our lives and giving new life to others.

That shared authority exists in us and is revealed by us as the many and varied gifts God has imparted to each of our lives. That means every one of us has authority. As the pastor here, I don't have more authority than you. I don't have better authority than you. I just have a different authority. God gives each of us gifts and authority unique to our lives. God is generous, extravagant with the gifts he gives and the authority he shares. We all have God-given authority.

There's no person without authority. The difference isn't that some have authority and others don't. The difference is that some recognise and exercise their authority and others don't. Regardless, God knows and sees the authority he has given us and waits for us to see and know it too. And when we do, we change our mind and go to the vineyard.

What is the authority God has given you? What gifts, what divine attributes, has God bestowed upon you? Are you living from that authority and sharing those gifts with others? Will you go to the vineyard where there is God's work to be done? Will you repent as the tax-collectors and prostitutes did and be confident about entering the kingdom of God; or, will you chance your arm and rely on your own power or so-called spiritual superiority as the chief priests and the elders did?

Of course, there is the third possibility as represented by Jesus himself, who both said "Yes" always to his Father's will and also did his Father's will at all times. There are many questions for each of us to ponder as we hear our Lord calling to serve him and each other in love and humility. Friends, I implore you go to God's vineyard and labour alongside our suffering companions with a song in your hearts, because the work of God's kingdom is eternally significant. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.

[1]http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2017/01/10/daily_homily_jesus_had_authority_because_he_was_a_servant/en-1284706 - accessed 11/09/2020.
