

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Dianne Andrews
October 1, 2023

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalms 78:1-4, 12-16

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

The Heart of Authority

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA.

Good morning! It is good to worship together with you today, to pray together, to ponder God's Word, and to share the gift of Christ's holy feast. I come from Port Townsend where I recently retired as the rector of St. Paul's. In these first few months of retirement, I have been reflecting on my journey of faith that began with a simple, child-shaped love of Jesus I acquired in the Congregational Church. The childhood memory that stands out is being a third grader in Vacation Bible School... when we studied the culture of Burma... and learned to sing *Jesus Loves Me*, not only in English, but in Burmese (*sing*). As I grew older, there were many years apart from any church. Then, in my early 30's, I experienced a deep homecoming to the Episcopal Church... a homecoming that eventually led me to seminary and to ordination as a priest.

Over the years, I have had many, many conversations with seekers, with doubters, and with the unshakably confident... those who are sure that they understand who God is and how God acts in the world. Some of my favorite conversations have been with children who ask the most challenging questions about life and faith... while still being immersed in an unfettered sense of awe. The one thing I know for sure... is that a living faith is not solely about ideas. A living faith is grounded in an awe-filled... prayerful relationship with the creator and sustainer of our lives. I know, also, that a living faith is shaped by the stories at the center of our religious tradition, stories that are to be told over and over again.

Back in April, as I was packing up my church office, I went through the hundreds of books I had accumulated over the decades, offering thanks for the jewels of understanding they had given me... as well as for the many challenging ideas that have kept my faith understanding alive and evolving. Encountering new ideas, contradictory ideas, and even bad ideas, offers varieties of perspectives on scripture, tradition, and faith that helps keep spiritual stagnation at bay. Faith is not meant to be fixed and unchanging. A living faith is to be sprinkled with a healthy dose of doubt. As we grow through the various stages of life, a living faith is cultivated through the engagement of our personal life stories with the stories of our faith tradition... all supported by practices of prayer and worship. One of the many reasons I love the Episcopal church is because it

welcomes the big questions and nourishes our life of faith within a sacramental community whose center is the love of God known in Christ.

In today's scripture texts, the theme is "authority." In the lesson from Exodus, Moses' authority is questioned by a parched and bone-weary people... who have escaped oppression and servitude under pharaoh... and are now complaining: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill our children and livestock with thirst?" *Who is this God who allows our suffering?* In today's psalm, God's authority is revealed through acts of mercy that have been recounted down through the generations. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we are given the "Christ Hymn" ... "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" ... who emptied himself... was born in human likeness... who gave himself fully for us... even to death... that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend... and every tongue should confess..." Paul is telling us to cherish the mind of Jesus as an authority for us... encouraging us to be in ever-deeper relationship with Christ. In our gospel lesson, Jesus turns the tables when his authority is challenged... in order to illustrate what true faithfulness looks like. These issues of authority require us to continually ask ourselves these questions:

- 1) why do we follow the leaders we choose to follow (i.e. from where does their authority come?);
- 2) why do we believe what we do?what is the evidence?;
- 3) by what authority are we moved to act?

Why do we believe what someone says, be it a preacher, a teacher, a politician, or anyone who seeks to influence us? What filters are we using? Can we differentiate what we want to hear... from what is actually being said? How do we choose to hear? How do we discern God's deeper truth? We who claim Christ as the center of our faith, our lives, and our community... cannot be complacent about the truth and authority that informs our faith understanding. In the Episcopal tradition... the metaphor that we use as a tool for gauging authority... is what? (three-legged stool: scripture, tradition, and reason)... A life of ongoing learning, reflection, prayer and active community engagement help enrich our understanding of who Christ is for us and how we are called to live and serve. So the questions are: How do we know what we claim to know? Who is God for us? and... What authority do we claim as followers of Christ?



Today, we meet Jesus in the lively 21st chapter of Matthew's gospel. It is Jesus' final week. He has made his majestic entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, cheered on by joyful "hosannas!" Jesus then heads straight for the temple where he cures the lame and the blind... but not before making quite a statement... and a scene... by flipping over tables... sending merchants and moneychangers scurrying... because he is outraged

about a system of exorbitant tithes and taxes that bar the poor from approaching God's temple... forcing the destitute to remain outside the temple gates. After a night's sleep, Jesus heads back to the temple to teach and, consequently, to provoke. Jesus certainly caught the attention of the temple priests and scribes who inquire about his credentials. Who does Jesus think he is to march into the temple, teaching and healing, and stirring things up? The temple's chief priests and elders confront Jesus by asking: "By what authority are you doing these things... and who gave you this authority?" The religious elite have social, economic, and political power that has been legitimized by the Roman empire. The power of the chief priests was not earned. They achieved their positions by the accident of their births into priestly families. The authority of scribes was earned through training. The elders claimed authority through personal and political connections. The priests, scribes and elders see nothing of themselves in Jesus. Who does he think he is? Who or what is the source of *his* authority?

Jesus throws the ball back into their court by asking the temple "authorities" about the source of John the Baptist's power to baptize. Was John a prophet sent from God? ...or... was John, whose larger-than-life persona bore a striking resemblance to the memory of the prophet Elijah... was John's image created by wishful humans? Neither answer could be proven. If the temple authorities claimed that John the Baptist's power was of heavenly origin, they would have just painted themselves into a corner for not having believed John... and for not having stood by him. On the other hand... if they answered that John's authority was of "human origin," the people might revolt. The priests, scribes and elders are being confronted with their own hypocrisy. The questioners were experts in religious Law, but the Law was not going to help them answer Jesus' question. They simply give the safe answer: "We do not know." Jesus says back to them: "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." ...and then he tells them a story...

Jesus shines a spotlight on blatant hypocrisy by telling a parable about two sons and their father's orders to go work in the vineyard. The first son refused to obey, but ended up changing his mind and heading out to the vineyard to work. The second son said, "sure, I'll go..." but he never shows up for work. Jesus asks, "which of the two sons did the will of his father?" Which son was faithful? The chief priests and scribes know the answer. It wasn't the son who said he would go work but failed to follow through. The one who did the father's will was the son who actually acted... the one who exerted the effort to be faithful to the father's command. The temple officials have, once again, revealed their own hypocrisy for not acting in the face of injustice. Jesus then crowns the moment by saying, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him." "Those people," the tax

collectors and prostitutes, who...from all outward appearances have said “no” to God..., are more like the first son... than temple officials who claim religious authority... They “use the right words” ... but miss the truth that has been sent to them through the prophet John... The hypocrites reside comfortably in the temple, neglecting to care anything about those outside the temple gates. The biblical commentator Debi Thomas says it this way:

What Jesus opposed through the story of the father and the two sons was all forms of religion that stop at empty words. All forms of piety that don't move us into the world of concrete action on behalf of justice, mercy, equality, love, and compassion. All forms of Christianity that flicker to life on Sunday morning, but then fade out between Monday and Saturday.¹

I think that it is safe to say that we don't want to be like the temple officials. Our purpose... as God's people who identify ourselves as being members of the church, the Body of Christ... our purpose is not to worship the virtue of piety, or idolize religious language, church buildings, or any of the beautiful elements of our worship tradition. We can love them as tools that support our life of faith and service, but we are not to idolize them. The authority we claim... is the love of God that we know and nurture... by being in a dynamic relationship with Christ... who strengthens us, confronts us, challenges us, and invites us to grow... in a relationship that shows us how to be in relationship with one another... and that compels us to see Christ in all people... especially the poor, the marginalized, the outcast... and even those who cause us the most grief. In Christ, we are given what we need. In dedicated prayerful practice we are nourished. Amidst conflict and frustration... we are strengthened through the love of Jesus and his example.

It is important continually to examine the authority we claim as Christians... that we may be ever more conscious of our own inner workings and identify the reasons we believe what we do. It is important to be aware of the filters that we use to process information and come to our conclusions. It is important to ask ourselves whether we are choosing complacency rather than choosing obedience and fidelity to the commission given to us in baptism. The work of faithful discipleship is life giving to us and to others... and it makes God smile. Using our God-given strength and authority to move beyond our comfort zones... we head out to do the often challenging and messy work of seeking justice... and offering a generous hand up to all... to all whose place at God's table of radical hospitality is ready and waiting. No exceptions!

As beloved disciples, our authority comes from a vibrant, living, evolving relationship with our God known in Christ Jesus.

¹ Debi Thomas, “Words are Not Enough,” *Journey with Jesus*, September 20, 2020, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>.

We nurture that relationship by remembering who we are and to whom we belong...

a people who are bless, beloved, and forgiven

a people who are forever welcomed

wounds, warts, and all.

We are called to claim our authority

in the deep love of Christ,

and to embody that love...

out in the world...

...NO EXCEPTIONS!

Amen..

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