

“By What Authority Should I Change?” 10-1-17 CHC

Exodus 17:1-7

Matthew 21:23-32

A popular bumper sticker reads, “Question Authority”. We are all pretty good at doing that. Our constitution gives us the right of free speech when we disagree and feel a need to challenge what those in authority might say or do. The recent “take a knee” response to President Trump’s remarks by the NFL and NBA brought owners and players together in protest.

People with authority have a degree of power over us. We don’t necessarily like that. “Who gives you the authority to tell me what to do?” I might ask someone. Human nature both requires and resists authority. We enjoy complaining about those who are in authority, be it the government, the Session, the Presbytery, the pastor, the staff, or whomever we deem has a degree of power over outcomes affecting our lives. Yet we need a credible authority by which to guide our lives. That was my greatest challenge as a teenager. Who or what authority was going to be the source for guiding my life?

Webster defines authority as “the power or right to command or act; dominion; persons exercising power, esp. government officials; a reference source of expert in a field; a ruling; proof; credibility; assurance”.

Moses finds his authority questioned. In the middle of a wilderness, no water, complaining loudly, the people demand Moses to “Give us water to drink...Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

Knowing that his authority as a leader derives from the authority of God and God’s call to lead the people on behalf of that authority, Moses turns to God. He is scared that they are going to kill him. So he says to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me”.

I imagine the executive leadership of Equifax might be feeling similarly, but for different reasons. There is such a thing as the abuse of authority. But this is not Moses’ problem.

As he turns to God, the source of his authority, God tells him what to do. “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock of Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink”.

By quarreling and testing God, the people question God’s presence through the language of a lawsuit of sorts; “Is the Lord among us or not?”

But the question raises a question. How do we understand the authority of God’s presence among us? Let’s look at our ordination vows. A pastor or Elder affirms in response to the ordination questions that he or she acknowledges and will submit to the authority of God through Christ, receiving the gift of God on behalf of the bestowed authority of God to lead. Please note that it is to pastor God’s, not the pastor’s or Elder’s people.

The congregation acknowledges, affirms, and accepts the pastor, “as our pastor chosen by God through the voice of this congregation to guide us in the way of Jesus Christ” and “to encourage and follow him or her as she/he guides us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church” (Book of Order, G14.0510). Throughout the biblical narrative all true authority comes from God. It is to be recognized as such and applied in humility and love.

The authority question gets proposed to Jesus by those assuming to be acting on the authority of God, the chief priests and elders of the people. The implication is that human authority exercised in the name of God might stray from the integrity of its source. So there are appropriate times to question the nature of how that authority is being exercised. Authoritarianism, demanding submission, is different from an authority that is obeyed willingly. The scribes taught by citing opinions from different sources, appealing not to their own authority but to that of others.

Jesus’ authority is more immediate. When the people heard him teach there was an authority different from that of their scribes. Matthew grasps this reality; “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:28). As one person framed it, Jesus taught “as one who knew the mind of God, and was commissioned to declare it” (Matthew Henry).

Jesus speaks of his authority as exercising the prerogatives of God, not acting of his own accord. What does Jesus do? He can be found forgiving sins(Mark 2:5-8), healing(Mark 1:34), exorcising demons(Mark 1:27), controlling the power of nature(Luke8:24-5), raising the dead(Luke 7:11-17 and John 11:38-44), teaching with authority(Matthew 7:28-9 and the “I say” of Matthew 5:21-48), demanding that people submit to his authority both on earth and at the judgement, as the obedient Son appealing to God and the scriptures as the final authority, having victory over sin and death in his resurrection, exercising authority over the evil one and the church, and using his power and authority to redeem your life and mine.

It is no wonder then that the religious leaders raise the question, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Of course, it is another trick question to which Jesus responds with a question, answering them on condition that they appropriately answer his question; “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

Of course, they fumble about as we do when asked a question that we would rather not answer. Caught between fear of the crowds regarding John’s validity as a prophet in the peoples’ eyes and recognizing Jesus’ authority as being from God, they respond, “We do not know”. I like Jesus’ answer; “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things”.

Jesus cares about our apprehension of God’s truth and authority. But it must be an authority recognized and responded to from the integrity of the heart. That is our work, the work of faith and belief, to learn to recognize and trust God’s authority in our lives. So how do I recognize God’s authority in my life?

As I was sorting through various belief systems, seeking a viable anchor which might stabilize and guide me through life, I heard a fresh presentation of the call of Jesus Christ. There was an authority in Christ’s

words that grasped my heart. Through the preaching of a Presbyterian pastor during college, the Holy Spirit confirmed the authority of the gospel. My eyes were opened, my mind embracing Christ's call to "Follow me". I caught a new glimpse of myself and the grace and love of God. The authority of God's Spirit and Word would guide my life. Paul writes to the Romans, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). This is the dynamic that we interact with throughout our faith lives.

Exodus speaks of the congregation of the Israelites who "journeyed by stages". Isn't that what we do? We believe, then we doubt. Our consciences struggle with trust and faith. Can we really trust God, especially as we face difficult moments, feeling deprived of life's basic wants and needs? Then we regain the appropriate balance with God regarding trust and faith, get up, learn our lessons, and go forth again until the next cloud cover and fog obscures the vision of our capacity to trust God.

The parable Jesus tells engages this perpetual dialogue of the soul. "What do you think?" Two sons respond to their father in different ways. Asked to work in the vineyard the first son says, "I go, sir". But he did not go. The second responds, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went". Then Jesus asks the obvious question; "Which of the two did the will of his father?" We say 'yes', we say 'no', but God is in the mix with us, moving each of us to respond to Jesus' 'Yes' to us (2 Corinthians 1:15-20).

It has been said that "every change of mind is a change of heart...every change of heart is a change of mind". Repentance in Jesus' world is a change of mind and heart, apprehended within the recognition of the authority of the Father. We come back to that authority time and time again.

Richard Rohr, Christian writer and teacher, observes how many people over the years, even good-willed people, have listened to presentations of the gospel yet have done very little in terms of lifestyle changes, economic or political rearrangements, or facing their own egos, staring God down, stubborn to believe and exercise living faith. After all, "Isn't church about believing ideas to be true or false? Isn't religion about attending services?" Not so. Rather, Jesus is inviting us to see the authority of a living God grasping our minds and hearts and making a change in how we live and think (Homiletics, Sept.-Oct., p.43).

Jesus is not asking us this morning to believe or disbelieve in any doctrines or dogmas. He is saying to us, "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him" (Psalm 34:8).

Come to the Table this morning, take the bread and the cup, say 'yes' to Jesus' 'Yes' to you, inviting you into a living relationship; "This is my body, given for you...This cup is the new covenant in my blood for the forgiveness of sin...eat and drink, all of you. The one who eats this bread will never be hungry...the one who drinks from this cup will never be thirsty".

Jesus' authority given by the Father through the Holy Spirit possesses the power and right to command us to enter into a change of heart and mind that only Jesus can make effective in our souls.

