

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

Proper 21, Year A: Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16
Matthew 21:23-32

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Key Passages: *When he 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?” (Matthew 23:23)*

[The Lord said to Moses:] “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” (Exodus 17:6a)

“Who is in charge here? Who is the manager?” I was working with a group of city employees involved in refuse collection. We were launching a new program to help develop supervisory skills for promotion and also to involve employees at all levels in developing ways to improve the services of the city. The point was to understand supervisory authority and to see how it could be shared for mutual benefit.

Most every organization has some kind of hierarchical structure, designed to establish authority and responsibility and to clarify working relationships. The most rigid of these organizations place highest value on rapid decision-making, usually to preserve security, such as a military unit. There isn't time to debate when lives are at risk. Everyone knows who is in charge and how to respond to orders.

Other organizations have more informal structures. And some try to remove the lines altogether, to value the informal authority of employees with new ideas and energy for change. There are often internal struggles in such organizations. Trust is required for shared authority, and organizations with low tolerance for risk have trouble making such adjustments. Think of school teachers, with years of professional experience and skill in working with young people, forced into a curriculum focused primarily on testing as the sole measure of mastery of material. Or physicians ordering extensive procedures just to demonstrate that they have made every effort to treat a disease, even when their judgment tells them these efforts are futile.

Respect for authority is at a low ebb in our society. Perhaps some of this is good, as more information makes it possible for people to make up their own minds rather than blindly trusting the “experts.” But as increasing sources of “information” abound, including all sorts of unedited opinions from unknown

sources, our cynicism increases along with our ignorance. With so much “news” flooding our literal and figurative inboxes, we become overwhelmed trying to find sources we can trust. What interests are being served in the various reports and analyses being presented to us? How can we conduct rational debate when the rules of engagement seem to have devolved into name-calling and hysteria?

Our two readings today present us with circumstances in which issues of authority arise. These texts are especially useful to us at Trinity Church as enter our time of transition and discernment in the call of a new rector, as we think about clerical authority and leadership. There is guidance for us in these texts.

In our first reading Moses and the people are on the move in the wilderness after escaping from Egypt. This arduous journey continues to challenge their trust in Moses and ultimately in God. They have been promised a new home, a land where they can be safe and thrive. They have been released from slavery, but the promise is still unfulfilled. In this time of hardship perhaps it is natural that they wonder if God has deserted them.

There is no water in the place where they are camped. The people turn on Moses: “Is the Lord among us or not? Does the Lord know that we are dying of thirst? Does God care?” The people want Moses to plead their case with God, to provide water as a relief to their thirst and an assurance of God’s providence.

When things go wrong, we are tempted to “test God,” as the Scriptures say. We demand proof from God that our problem can be solved. We bargain with God: I will believe in you if you provide what I am asking for. And the converse is, “I won’t believe in you if I don’t get what I am asking for.”

Moses turns to God for help. The people are questioning his authority; they are rebelling against his leadership. I love God’s response. It is not a theoretical treatise on how to deal with complaining. God provides specific directions on how to find water. And God is in the midst of the work: he stands in front of the rock (this is not explained) and through Moses and his staff, water flows from the rock. The God of creation brings sustenance out of disorder. Obedience to God, trusting God, brings order out of chaos.

In our Gospel reading, the question of authority arises from those who traditionally are in charge, the chief priests and elders—the clergy of the day. This question has arisen constantly throughout Jesus’ ministry. This upstart rabbi is undermining the authority of established traditions. They confront him, demanding to know the source of his authority. Jesus cleverly escapes their trap by setting a trap for them in return.

Confrontations with Jesus have surprising turns throughout the gospel. He has conversations with outcasts, he tells stories about errant sons and repentant sinners, he tells the rich and powerful that the poor and despised will enter heaven ahead of them. His picture of kingdom of heaven is counter-cultural. Everything is turned upside down. No wonder they question his authority.

But Jesus is not engaging in mental trickery. He is trying to show his disciples—and anyone who will listen—that God has a way of judging worth and dignity that goes beyond our obvious empirical evidence. That the virtues of humility and sacrifice are the true source of power, not reliance on wealth, privilege, and coercion. The God who leads the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt is the God who continuously works to lift up the oppressed and turn the hearts of the proud to the true source of power: God's love for all people.

For it is in the doing that the authority is demonstrated. Jesus contrasts those who say they are following God's will, but in fact do nothing, with those who may not say the right words, but in fact are faithful followers. Authority is conveyed in discerning and doing God's will. Jesus spends his life demonstrating what that means, even to a shameful death, to show that true power lies in nonviolent love.

It would be easier if God's ways were not so subtle. It would be easier if we could rely on our instincts for self-preservation, security, and survival. It would be easier not to try to live with compassion, humility, and service. We want to be right, to know that we have figured out what God expects of us, that we not have to struggle to discern the truth and live it, however costly. We want to know "who is in and who is out." We want Jesus' authority to tell us. But Jesus is not interested in theoretical discussions. He is interested in our having a relationship with him, a relationship which helps us discover ourselves as God's beloved, just as we discover that all are loved by God.

Recently a group of conservative Roman Catholic academics and clergy have formally accused Pope Francis of heresy. They reject his document "The Joy of Love," in which he opened the door to letting civilly remarried Catholics receive Communion. Current Catholic teaching requires that divorced persons receive an annulment of their previous marriage before they can receive Communion. Francis has suggested that bishops and priests work pastorally with such persons to help them return to the primary Sacrament of the church, believing, as he says, that "the Eucharist isn't a prize for the perfect, but nourishment for the weak." (*Boston Globe*, September 29, 2017, p. A5). It might remind you of Jesus saying to those about to stone a woman for adultery, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." (See John 8:1-11.)

The authority of Jesus rests in the power of Creator God, who is always working for our healing and reconciliation. When we have the humility to stop

trusting in our own limited vision and to live into the power of God's discernment, we catch glimpses of that truth. Grabbing for easy answers is likely to lead us in the wrong direction. It is a lifetime of learning through discipline and prayer and listening. But God does not desert us in the wilderness of uncertainty. There is water flowing from the rock, if we have the patience to look for it.