

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

OCTOBER 1, 2023



AUTHORITY

and the nature of our relationships

by Drew Downs

We often associate the word *authority* with the word *power*. These words do have much in common, but are clearly not the same thing. One common characteristic they have, however, is relationship.

Authority, like any aspect of leadership, is often treated like something someone simply has. Perhaps by virtue of an office, a uniform, or title. We speak to a manager because they have the authority to help us.

But it is only ever a relational concept. One does not have authority in themselves, but within an institution or in relation to others.

One of our social projects throughout human history has been to limit opportunities for authority: to limit conflict or consolidate power. Often to trust *the rules* to organize us without people. But what if we, instead, embraced our relationships and authority? To simply listen to each other?

ORDINARY TIME

2023

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Telling the Story

This week, we enter the part of the lectionary season that I struggle with the most. If we were reading the gospel straight through, we'd know that, since last Sunday, Jesus has entered Jerusalem. He has shamed Temple leaders and disrupted the Temple's commerce. And, if we recall, they've wanted him dead for awhile.

That isn't clear in the lectionary. Our readings over the next few weeks reflect the naked politics of the powerful confronting Jesus on his authority, theology, and purpose. And of Jesus turning the tables and shaming them in front of everybody. These readings need to be read with this context of conflict in mind.

As the story continues, we can see that the conflict is necessary. Not as a desire, but as the inevitable result of challenging the establishment and staging a public demonstration. Jesus came to Jerusalem, preparing to be killed. He knows what will happen because he knows that some will reject the Kin-dom. This isn't pretty, but it is the story. And it reveals God's glory in the resurrection.

Next week, October 8th, the people of St. Stephen's will explore our common story, to better understand ourselves, our hopes and motivations, and what makes our congregation special. I hope you join us for this time together.

Because it is our sense of the story, and how all of it fits together, that helps us know who we are. And what we are called to do. Especially in light of our relationship to God and Jesus's Way of Love.

With love,
Drew

ORDINARY TIME

2023

FOR SUNDAY

Proper 21A

October 1, 2023

Collect

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 21:23-32

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?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "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.

ORDINARY TIME

Reflection

The conflict in this week's gospel feels like an iconic debate. On the one hand, we have Jesus, our central figure of authority. And on the other are the official authorities, whose job is to maintain the rules of the faith. So we make it rebels versus the establishment. Or purpose of the law versus the letter of the law.

Of course, this is the junk we all bring to the moment. It isn't entirely reflective of it.

Jesus really is trying to alter the public's understanding of the Law. And his appeal to authority is not coming from within the given system, but from outside it. It is pretty safe to say that most Christians today would reject such a move now. We do love our tradition.

The question of authority we explore today is one the church has wrestled with for two thousand years. How much trust do we place in the Holy Spirit and how much in earthly systems? Both options have been heavily exploited by sinful people and yield grave injustices. I don't think methodology is the point.

What we see in this confrontation, and the parable Jesus tells in response, is not a treatise on the nature of authority, but how we treat God and one another.

Do we recognize how God is present in our lives? Do we actually listen or merely trust that our tradition has it all figured out? Is there room in our relationship with God for an actual relationship with God? Or is it more of a hypothetical thing? Because sometimes, in the pursuit of certainty and an understanding of what to do in a certain situation, we forget that the fundamental posture is one of relationship.

The same applies to our relationships with the people around us. Do we listen? Share authority with them? Allow ourselves to be changed? Hear God speaking through our neighbors? Do we love them? All of them?

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