

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 1, 2017
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By What Authority

“Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known, will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?” Amen.

A group of military leaders built a “supercomputer” that was able to solve any strategic problem. They gathered for a demonstration and the engineer instructed the officers to feed a challenging tactical problem into it. A hypothetical situation was given to the computer and then they asked the pivotal question: attack or retreat? The enormous computer hummed for an hour and then printed out the one word answer- yes. The generals looked at each other and finally one of them submitted a second request to the computer. Yes what? Instantly the computer responded: Yes sir!

Having grown up in a military home I can totally relate. Being raised by a general officer, I learned a thing or two about authority. The first was not to question it and the second was that authority is earned. You may have heard the saying “Rank has its privileges.” As much as I appreciate the many gifts of being raised with discipline and strong moral convictions, it has taken a lifetime to learn that there is value in questioning those things or people that have power in your life. What we have given authority over us dramatically impacts the shape of our lives. In the end, true authority rests in the palpable connection between who you are and what you do.

The gospel today involves a confrontational moment between the religious leaders in Jerusalem and Jesus. Now before we vilify those chief priests and elders for their arrogance, it is useful to know that right before this conflict, Jesus had entered the temple and turned over the tables in the marketplace. No longer was Jesus perceived as an eccentric prophet with charismatic qualities. He was a true threat to their social, political and religious order. Naturally he was questioned by those in power, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” In true Rabbinical style, Jesus disarmed them with questions of his own.

Jesus pulled back the veil to uncover the origins of their beliefs and actions. He challenged righteousness based upon position or tradition rather than a loving relationship with God. Then he told them the parable of the two sons, one who said he would do his father’s will but did not, and the other who at first said no, but then changed his mind and responded with action. Jesus always points us to integrity, matching word to deed, authenticity to embodiment.

We, too, are challenged to ask the difficult questions. What or who is in authority in our lives? How are our actions shaped by the power we ascribe to this authority? In our culture, education, money and achievement can be our Gods if we are not mindful. How would our lives look different if love was at the helm? How we spend our time, money, and energy all reflect what we value.

Theologian and author Richard Rohr says in his book *Falling Upwards*, that we spend the first half of life striving to solidify our identity, to achieve, to accumulate, and the second half, letting things go, reassessing our priorities, relinquishing control. He writes, “When you get your, 'Who am I?', question right, all of your, 'What should I do?' questions tend to take care of themselves.”

Rohr suggests however, that organized religion often affirms the status quo, rather than upending it. Yet, Jesus came as a prophet to deconstruct a system that was unjust and oppressive, a culture that idolized power and wealth. There is nothing new under the sun, my friends. In our success driven culture, nothing unnerves us more than encountering our fears of powerlessness and poverty. Jesus comes to turn over our tables, to realign our priorities.

We can look to the words of St. Paul in the reading today from Philippians, to understand what we are being asked to do. “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love make my joy complete having the same love, being of one accord. Do nothing from selfish ambition but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but the interests of others.” Thankfully, we don’t have to be or do all of this on our own, because God is at work in each of us. That is the authority we can claim. God at work in us enables us to love beyond our imagining, give beyond our capacity, serve in radical humility.

But, letting go of what has had power over our lives places us in a liminal space, which is both exciting and frightening. To make space for new priorities, new practices means embracing the vulnerability of change. There is nothing in our lives that we have given power that through the grace of God, we cannot let go of and be transformed. That is a word of hope for all of us.

Today we begin our new Stewardship theme, though we are many, we are one body through Christ Jesus. We represent the abundance of gifts that God has bestowed upon us. Imagine for just one moment if we were to truly embrace our identity as the body of Christ. We would emulate his attributes and actions, upending the tables of injustice in our time. Together we could challenge all that does not serve the purpose of love, mercy and compassion.

I invite you to consider this year how you may put your belief into action, integrate your faith and your deeds, put your money where your passion is. If we are to truly be the hands and feet of Christ in the world, we need all of our gifts of time, talent and treasure in action. God is calling us like those sons, to go out into the vineyard. The question remains how will we answer? We have been given the power and authority to take God’s love to all we meet. We will do this in the small acts of kindness each day and in the larger efforts to be peacemakers in a conflict laden world. Thanks be to God who loves us beyond measure and gives us the power to transform not only our own hearts but the hearts and lives of others. Amen