

Matthew 21:23-32  
October 1, 2017

**“BY WHAT AUTHORITY?”**

**IF I WERE TO ASK THE QUESTION, “*WHAT AUTHORITY DO I HAVE HERE AS YOUR PASTOR?*,” MANY OF YOU WOULD KNOW THE ANSWER.**

**YOU MIGHT, FIRST OF ALL, KNOW THAT ACCORDING TO THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, I HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO ADMINISTER THE SACRAMENTS – BAPTISM & COMMUNION.**

**YOU MIGHT ALSO KNOW THAT I HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO PREACH WHAT I BELIEVE GOD HAS CALLED ME TO PREACH.**

**THOSE ARE DENOMINATIONAL AUTHORITIES THAT I HAVE BEEN GRANTED BY VIRTUE OF BEING YOUR PASTOR.**

**SPECIFICALLY AT EASTMINSTER, YOU MIGHT ALSO KNOW OF THE ONE PIECE OF AUTHORITY I HAVE BEEN GRANTED BY OUR CHURCH SESSION.**

**IT WAS GIVEN TO ME MANY YEARS AGO AND, TO MY RECOLLECTION, IT REMAINS THE ONE AND ONLY LEVEL OF AUTHORITY SPECIFICALLY GRANTED TO ME BY SESSION ACTION.**

**THE PASTOR IS THE ONLY ONE AUTHORIZED TO GRANT PERMISSION TO CONSUME FOOD & DRINKS IN THE CHURCH PARLOR.**

**THAT’S IT!**

**OFFICIALLY, I HAVE NO OTHER POWER THAN THAT IN THIS CHURCH!**

**THAT IS ONE OF THE HALLMARKS OF OUR PRESBYTERIAN TRADITION.**

**IT’S EVEN IMPLICIT IN OUR NAME – “PRESBYTER” SIMPLY BEING THE GREEK WORD FOR WHAT WE TRANSLATE, IN ENGLISH, AS “ELDER.”**

**WE BELIEVE THAT GOD CALLS WOMEN & MEN, THROUGH THE VOICE OF THE CONGREGATION, TO BE THE LEADERS – THE “AUTHORITY” OF THE CHURCH – LEADING UNDER THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST, OUR ULTIMATE AUTHORITY.**

**THAT’S REALLY THE QUESTION THAT’S BEING ADDRESSED IN THIS PASSAGE.**

**IS JESUS OUR ULTIMATE AUTHORITY AND, IF SO, WHERE DOES HE GET THAT AUTHORITY?**

**OUR AUTOMATIC ANSWER, OF COURSE, IS “YES! OF COURSE JESUS IS MY ULTIMATE AUTHORITY. HE’S IN CHARGE OF MY LIFE.”**

**AND WHERE DOES JESUS GET THAT AUTHORITY?**

**THAT’S WHAT THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WANTED TO KNOW WHEN THEY ASKED HIM, “BY WHAT AUTHORITY?”**

**DOES HIS AUTHORITY COME FROM A HUMAN SOURCE, BECAUSE IF IT DOES, THERE WILL BE OTHERS WHO WILL COMPETE FOR THAT AUTHORITY & THERE WILL ALSO BE OTHERS WHO WILL COME AFTER HIM WITH THE SAME *LEVEL* OF AUTHORITY.**

**IF, HOWEVER, THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS COMES FROM A DIVINE SOURCE – IF HIS AUTHORITY IS FROM GOD – IF HE IS, IN FACT, THE ONE & ONLY SON OF GOD, THEN THE CHURCH HE RULES OCCUPIES A VERY UNIQUE PLACE – A UNIQUE PLACE IN OUR WORLD AND A UNIQUE PLACE IN OUR LIVES.**

**BUT HERE’S THE CATCH – WHILE WE LIKEN AUTHORITY TO POWER, THE AUTHORITY THAT JESUS EXHIBITED IS DISPLAYED – NOT THROUGH *POWER* – BUT THROUGH *SERVANTHOOD*.**

**AND IF WE STILL WANT TO CLAIM THAT JESUS IS OUR ULTIMATE AUTHORITY, IT IS THAT EXAMPLE TO WHICH WE ARE CALLED – INDIVIDUALLY & COLLECTIVELY AS THE CHURCH.**

**OUR LECTIONARY EPISTLE READING FOR TODAY IS TAKEN FROM THE SECOND CHAPTER OF PHILIPPIANS WHERE PAUL SAYS,**

***“LET THE SAME MIND BE IN YOU THAT WAS IN CHRIST JESUS, WHO, THOUGH HE WAS IN THE FORM OF GOD, DID NOT REGARD EQUALITY WITH GOD AS SOMETHING TO BE EXPLOITED, BUT EMPTIED HIMSELF, TAKING THE FORM OF A SLAVE, BEING BORN IN HUMAN LIKENESS. AND BEING FOUND IN HUMAN FORM, HE HUMBLLED HIMSELF AND BECAME OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH – EVEN DEATH ON A CROSS.”***

**THAT’S NOT OUR UNDERSTANDING OF AUTHORITY.**

**THAT’S NOT OUR PICTURE OF POWER.**

**WE MAY NEED TO RECONSIDER THAT QUESTION WE ASKED EARLIER – *“IS JESUS YOUR ULTIMATE AUTHORITY?”***

**IS HIS KIND OF AUTHORITY THE KIND OF AUTHORITY THAT YOU WANT FOR YOURSELF?**

**IS HIS DEFINITION OF POWER THE KIND OF POWER THAT YOU WANT?**

**BECAUSE, YOU SEE, I THINK WE, IN THE CHURCH, TEND TO HAVE A DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDING.**

**I THINK THAT’S WHY A PASSAGE LIKE THIS IN MATTHEW’S GOSPEL IS SO IMPORTANT.**

**THE CONTEXT OF THIS ENCOUNTER WITH THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS IS SIGNIFICANT.**

**IT TAKES PLACE IN JERUSALEM.**

**IT’S AFTER THE PALM SUNDAY ENTRANCE & IT’S AFTER THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE.**

**YOU PUT THESE TWO THINGS TOGETHER & VERY CLEARLY JESUS DOES NOT REPRESENT THE MESSIAH THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE ANTICIPATING.**

**I THINK THE MESSIAH THEY WERE LOOKING FOR MORE CLOSELY REPRESENTS THE MESSIAH *WE'RE* LOOKING FOR – THE MESSIAH THE CHURCH HAS *ALWAYS* LOOKED FOR.**

**WE WANT A MESSIAH WHO LAYS DOWN RULES & REGULATIONS AND THEN REJECTS THOSE WHO DON'T ABIDE BY THOSE RULES & REGULATIONS.**

**WE WANT A MESSIAH WHO SEPARATES PEOPLE INTO INSIDERS & OUTSIDERS – WITH US OBVIOUSLY BEING THE INSIDERS.**

**WE WANT A MESSIAH WITH THE AUTHORITY TO JUDGE & CONDEMN THOSE WHO DON'T FIT A PARTICULAR STANDARD OF LIVING OR OUTLOOK ON THE WORLD – BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT *WE* DO.**

**WE LOVE TO TALK ABOUT THE LOWERING OF STANDARDS IN OUR COMMUNITY.**

**WE SHAKE OUR HEADS IN DESPAIR OVER THE MORAL DECLINE OF AMERICA.**

**WE WRING OUR HANDS IN DISBELIEF OVER THE SINFULNESS OF SOCIETY.**

**BUT THEN WE READ A PASSAGE SUCH AS THIS AND IF WE HAVE EARS TO HEAR – WE UNDERSTAND THAT JESUS IS TALKING TO US.**

**WE ARE THE SON IN THE PARABLE WHO MOUTHS WORDS OF OBEDIENCE BUT FAILS TO FOLLOW THROUGH WITH HIS ACTIONS.**

**I SAW A DISTURBING STATISTIC LAST WEEK.**

**IT WAS IN AN ARTICLE ABOUT RELIGIOUS FAITH ACCORDING TO STATE.**

**I WAS STUNNED TO SEE THAT IN ALL 50 STATES, INDIANA IS THE STATE WITH THE SECOND-FASTEST GROWING RELIGIOUS GROUP IN THE ENTIRE COUNTRY.**

**THAT RELIGIOUS GROUP IS “UNAFFILIATED” – BETTER KNOWN AS “NONES.”**

**WHAT’S MOST DISTURBING ABOUT THAT STATISTIC IS THAT YOU & I ARE THE ONES RESPONSIBLE FOR IT!**

**WHY ARE THERE SO MANY PEOPLE SO DISENCHANTED WITH THE CHURCH THAT THEY WANT TO OFFICIALLY DESIGNATE THEMSELVES AS “UNAFFILIATED” WHEN IT COMES TO THEIR RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE?**

**BECAUSE THEY DON’T WANT TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH THOSE THEY SEE AS ARROGANT, JUDGMENTAL, RIGID, INSENSITIVE, UNCARING & HYPOCRITICAL.**

**LIKE IT OR NOT, THAT’S HOW MUCH OF THE WORLD VIEWS THE CHURCH.**

**AS WE READ THIS PASSAGE IN MATTHEW, IT’S ONE OF THOSE “*THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME*” KIND OF THINGS.**

**CONSIDER THE STORY OF A MAN WHO FINDS HIMSELF IN OVERWHELMING DESPAIR OVER HIS CIRCUMSTANCES IN LIFE.**

**HE SAID, “*EVERYTHING HAD FALLEN APART FOR ME – MY JOB, MY MARRIAGE, MY SENSE OF WELL-BEING & WORTH.*”**

***I DIDN’T KNOW WHERE TO TURN & EVERY DAY, THINGS SEEMED TO GET DARKER & DARKER FOR ME.***

***I WASN’T EATING PROPERLY.***

***I WASN’T SLEEPING.***

***ONE DAY, I FOUND MYSELF AT THE VERY BOTTOM OF THE PIT.***

***I DIDN’T KNOW IF I COULD MAKE IT ANOTHER DAY.***

***I WENT OUT & WANDERED THE STREETS, HOPING AGAINST HOPE THAT SOMETHING WOULD LIFT ME FROM THE DEEPEST VALLEY I'D EVER EXPERIENCED.***

***I WAS JUST WALKING AIMLESSLY DOWN THE STREET IN THE CENTER OF A BOULEVARD, TRAFFIC ON MY RIGHT & TRAFFIC ON MY LEFT.***

***I CAME TO A CORNER WITH A TRAFFIC LIGHT.***

***ON ONE SIDE OF THE STREET, I SAW A CHURCH.***

***ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STREET WAS A BAR.***

***IT SEEMED PATENTLY OBVIOUS WHICH WAY TO GO.***

***IT WAS – AS THEY SAY - A “NO-BRAINER” AS TO WHERE I WOULD MOST FIND LOVE & UNDERSTANDING – WHERE PEOPLE WOULD ACCEPT ME AS I WAS & BE PATIENT & SENSITIVE TO WHAT I WAS EXPERIENCING.”***

***WHICH WAY DO YOU THINK THAT MAN TURNED?***

***IF YOU WERE AN ACQUAINTANCE OF HIS, WHICH WAY WOULD HIS EXPERIENCE WITH YOU CAUSE HIM TO TURN?***

***THAT’S AN CHALLENGING QUESTION, ISNT IT?***

***TODAY IS WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY.***

***I THINK IT’S A GOOD DAY TO THINK OF SUCH THINGS.***

***THIS DAY HAS ALWAYS FELT SPECIAL TO ME.***

***WHETHER OR NOT IT’S TRUE, I LIKE TO THINK OF CHRISTIANS EVERYWHERE ON THIS DAY GIVING THANKS FOR ONE ANOTHER – FOR OUR DIFFERENT WAYS OF WORSHIPING, OUR DIFFERENT THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS, OUR VARIED BACKGROUNDS, LANGUAGES & GEOGRAPHICAL SETTINGS.***

***I LIKE TO THINK OF US PUTTING ALL OF THOSE THINGS ASIDE AND – WELL, BEING LIKE OUR BULLETIN COVER & HOLDING HANDS ACROSS THE WORLD & ACROSS THE AGES.***

**IN A WORLD THAT IS SO DEEPLY DIVIDED, IS IT TOO MUCH TO DREAM THAT THOSE OF US WHO LOOK TO JESUS CHRIST AS OUR ULTIMATE AUTHORITY MIGHT SERVE AS ROLE MODELS FOR THE REST OF THE WORLD OF WHAT IT MEANS TO SET ASIDE OUR DIFFERENCES FOR THE COMMON GOOD?**

**IS IT TOO MUCH TO DREAM THAT WE MIGHT WORK TO BECOME THE KIND OF PEOPLE WHO WOULD HELP THAT MAN IN TOTAL DESPAIR DECIDE THAT IT WAS TO THE CHURCH THAT HE SHOULD TURN TO FIND LOVE & HOPE & ACCEPTANCE?**

**AS WE COME TO THE TABLE THIS MORNING – AS WE PUT OUR DIFFERENCES ASIDE – MAY WE REMEMBER HOW OUR ULTIMATE AUTHORITY CAME INTO THE WORLD – MAY WE REMEMBER THOSE WORDS OF THE APOSTLE PAUL - *“DO NOTHING FROM SELFISH AMBITION OR CONCEIT, BUT IN HUMILITY REGARD OTHERS AS BETTER THAN YOURSELVES. LET EACH OF YOU LOOK NOT TO YOUR OWN INTERESTS, BUT TO THE INTERESTS OF OTHERS. LET THE SAME MIND BE IN YOU THAT WAS IN CHRIST JESUS, WHO, THOUGH HE WAS IN THE FORM OF GOD, DID NOT REGARD EQUALITY WITH GOD AS SOMETHING TO BE EXPLOITED, BUT EMPTIED HIMSELF, TAKING THE FORM OF A SLAVE, BEING BORN IN HUMAN LIKENESS. AND BEING FOUND IN HUMAN FORM, HE HUMBLLED HIMSELF AND BECAME OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH – EVEN DEATH ON A CROSS.”***

**IF THAT’S ONLY A DREAM – IT’S A GOOD ONE TO HAVE.**

**AND IT’S A GOOD ONE TO TURN INTO REALITY. AMEN.**

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