

Pentecost 18 A – 10/01/2023

What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘authority’? Who has authority? How do we get it? Do we want it? Sometimes the older you get the less you want, other than over your own life.

The way our world is set up there are levels of authority. The way our church is set up there are levels of authority. The way our lives are set up there is authority.

We are surrounded by authority. In some respect we have a choice whether we want to recognize it or not. Often there is a price to pay if we don’t recognize authority.

We first learn about authority in our homes growing up. Our parents or guardians are the first authority figures that we meet. Parents set healthy expectations to help children learn how to set healthy boundary lines for their own lives. As we are growing up we desire autonomy over our lives and once we have it we find out that it takes work to maintain it.

Throughout history we have seen healthy uses of authority and unhealthy. We have seen this in the church and in homes. Unhealthy authority occurs when we think we have all the answers. Healthy authority happens when we are willing to listen and work with others.

Unhealthy authority often causes us to want to keep things the same, as that is when we think we will have the most control. Jesus challenges the authority of the chief priests and elders of the people in our Gospel lesson for today. To put this scene in context in our Gospel lesson, let us first look at what came before this in chapter 21 of Matthew.

At the beginning of the chapter, we hear the familiar Palm Sunday story. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey with the people shouting Hosanna to the Son of David, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. The crowd was saying that he was the prophet, Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.

Then he entered the temple and began tipping tables and driving out those who were buying and selling. This is one of the only times that we see Jesus exerting this kind of physical energy toward people. He said to them that they had made his house a den of thieves but it was supposed to be a house of prayer.

This is the backdrop for today’s Gospel lesson. I’m sure when Jesus walked into the temple again, the chief priests and the scribes did not know what Jesus would say or do. Jesus wasn’t what their expectations for a Messiah were, but when he came into the temple earlier he sure took authority.

They wanted to keep their authority or maybe take back their authority. For the chief priests and scribes, their identity was wrapped up in the work they did in the temple. Their approach was to go right up to Jesus and ask him who said you could be teaching here as this is our territory.

Typical Jesus, who very seldom gave a straight answer, asked them a question, who gave the authority to John the Baptist to be baptizing, was it divine or human? Can you picture them huddling trying to give an answer that would help them keep their authority? Well, “If we say, ‘From divine,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe John?’”²⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.”²⁷ 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.

Jesus then told a parable to drive home the point that he was really trying to make. A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’²⁹ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went.³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I’m on my way; but he did not go.’³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, Of course “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God before you.”³² For John came walking on the road of justice 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.”

Jesus is not looking for people to just tell others what to do and not do it themselves. My husband’s mother used to say, “you have to walk your talk”. Authority is not about power and control. It is about living out what we say is true. If we have rules or guidelines, I believe we need to follow them until we change them.

Paul reminds us today about the model of Christ. In our 2nd lesson for today we have the same lesson often read on Palm Sunday as it points out that Jesus wielded a different type of authority. It was not one that people were used to, as the authority that were used to was one about taking advantage of others. Jesus authority was about loving others. Jesus modeled obedience to what God expected.

God came down to earth to be human. Most people at that time did not recognize God in human form as it wasn’t what they expected as the Messiah. John the Baptist had rocked the boat and people were beginning to listen to him. He was not trying to exert power and control over people but letting them know what he believed to be the truth. That was to repent and believe.

Jesus was rocking the boat as he was challenging everyone to actually live the law out of love for God and neighbor. In reality, this was following the law. Jesus was pointing out that the chief priests and scribes were not trying to follow the law, what they were teaching.

This is what Jesus continues to challenge us to do, to walk our talk, to follow the law out of love for God and neighbor. Laws are meant to be in place to protect the community and individuals, not so others gain power and control over others for their own gain. This kind of living, following the law that God in Jesus Christ gave us out of love for God and neighbor, is what tells others who our ultimate authority is.

This kind of living, which is the kingdom living that we continue to talk about is not easy. Walking our talk holds us accountable for saying that we are a Christian and loving God and our neighbor. We are taught authority and then we usually test it out.

So as Christians when we walk our talk we are challenged to model our love for God and others. This then tells people who our ultimate authority is. This type of authority is not about power and control, but about love for God and each other. This surpasses politics and corporations, educational institutions, etc. At one point in our life most of us have some level of authority, Jesus challenges us to use that authority out of love.