

Message: "Signals of Authenticity"

Scripture: Matthew 21:23-32

²³When 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?" ²⁴Jesus 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. ²⁵Did 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?' ²⁶But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷So 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.

²⁸"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹Which 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. ³²For 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.

As many of you know, I serve on the Mountain Sky Annual Conference District Committee on Ordained Ministry, or the DCOM; this is the initial ordination credentialing committee which assesses the qualifications of candidates for ministry - in effect, it is this committee which determines whether someone moves towards being a pastor or not. The DCOM is scheduled to meet tomorrow and Tuesday this week to perform this work. In preparation for this, I have been receiving papers from candidates for ministry all week long. These papers are where the candidates share with us who they are, how they are called, and what ministry means to them; they share their understanding of such challenging topics as suffering, forgiveness, justice, holiness, humanity, evil, joy, humility, and perhaps the most difficult of all, how to balance a church budget.

An essential part of the process is confidentiality, for we are examining not only their external performance; we spend the majority of our time with them discerning the condition and motivation of their hearts. This is not something you can put on a resume; it must be felt more than thought, discussed overtly more than assumed generally.

So it may surprise you that I am going to share with you this morning a report from the committee members on one particular candidate for ordained ministry -- I will withhold his name and give no hint of who this person is. But the report is one that deals with this candidate's problem with authority, which directly relates to our scripture passage today. Here's what the report says:

Candidacy Progress Report

Mountain Sky Annual Conference District Committee of Ordained
Ministry

Compiled by DCOM secretary Gracia Grindal

Synopsis and Recommendation: The general sense of the committee is that this candidate is presently unprepared for pastoral ministry.

Summary of Recommendation Details: The candidate seems to have an unconventional theology that is at odds with traditional interpretations. He has a history of tensions and conflict with church hierarchy; an incident of note was when he ran away from home at age 12, whereupon he sought out the local church leadership and intentionally started an argument. Such patterns of behavior appear to have only increased over time. He continues to make outrageous claims regarding his ministry experience, including the delusion that he battled hand to hand with the devil, turned water into a fine chianti, personally healed several desperately-afflicted individuals, and attended a conference with long-dead faith representatives. He has consistently refused to answer even the most basic of ordination questions promptly or clearly. His first sermon in his home congregation had the members rebel in offense; he was promptly shown the door. Furthermore, he has anger issues with which he needs to learn to deal. It is reported that he once entered a church holding a mission faire and threw out the people selling souvenirs and candles; it was a major controversy. Members of his internship committee report that he never answers questions directly but responds to questions with questions. Worst of all, he has a way of telling jokes that are blasphemous and inappropriate for religious people. He has trouble with authority over others as well as being unclear in his own authority. The candidate has never acknowledged these deficiencies. It is therefore the determination of this committee that it is very unlikely that this candidate is suited for pastoral ministry. We recommend that he be sent to a counselor to work on these issues before he goes any further in the process.

Yes, this candidate is Jesus; I found and edited this summary from Gracia Grindal (*professor emerita of rhetoric at Luther Seminary*); Professor Grindal wrote this report to address the question of how Jesus understood authority, and how he would likely fail the ordination process mainline denominations employ. It is clear not only from this report but from our scripture lesson that Jesus had a problem with authority as it exists between people.

But then, Jesus was already an authority on the matter of God; Jesus was God, somehow, someday, and needed no scrutiny as to what that meant. We are the ones who are trying to play catch up to the original notion of authority, where it is understood that it is not up to us to determine but acknowledge; and we have done a very poor job as a species of acknowledging what authority should mean, and what it should look like.

It should go without saying that authority should always be based on things like trust, honesty, integrity, effectiveness, and a heart oriented to the needs of those one has authority over. Sadly, these principles must be said over and over and over again, for there are so very many who refuse to hear, who grant authority where it doesn't belong, where it causes great destruction, and supports structures and people who promote inequity and harm.

It seems we have a hard time understanding how authority can go wrong. Authority without integrity is chaos; authority without responsibility is domination; authority without compassion is despotism; authority without empathy is oppression - none of these serve humanity well; none of these endure. Each such form of authority is a temporary affair, awaiting either the substitution of a stronger belligerent or the decimation of the society ruled over. Authority without integrity always, always leads to ruin.

There is a better way, says Jesus; there is a better approach, says God. It involves authority being founded upon integrity -- doing what is right, investing in the truth, discerning and enacting justice, and working for the good of all. In other words, true authority involves loving as God does, loving as Jesus showed us how - in doing what is right, not simply speaking what is right; and understanding that what is right is determined by God and not by us. The good news is that what God determines to be right serves our lives much better than any human construct. The authority of God is the only authority that works. Literally. In other words, the authority of God is primarily interested in what we actually do, not what we say; or, to put it more directly, what we say only has value as it relates to what we actually do.

Roger Lovette is a Baptist minister in Birmingham, Alabama, serving in intentional interim ministry in that region. He shared the following experience that speaks to what God's kind of authority looks like: "My son sent me a bulletin from the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia. One Sunday he stood in a long line of visitors to listen to Jimmy Carter teach Sunday school. He stayed for the worship service and sent me the program for the day. My eye stopped at this notice in the bulletin: *Rosalynn Carter will clean the church next Saturday. Jimmy Carter will cut the grass and trim the shrubbery.*

It's not always the one who talks or preaches or teaches who reflects the will of the Father. Sometimes it is the one who shows up on a hot Saturday afternoon to dust the pews, take out the trash, cut the grass—making the world a little better for Christ's sake."

Talking about faith is indeed important, but only as it relates to what we actually do in our lives. And it is the authority we acknowledge in Jesus that establishes what is worth doing.