

Sermon – Foundations of Faith: Questioning Authority
September 28, 2014
Matthew 21:23-32

Benjamin Franklin is reported to have said: “It is the first responsibility of every citizen to question authority.” We live in an age where that higher call does seem to be of unparalleled importance. Recent headlines have given us plenty of reasons why. Whether we are questioning the authority of the Ferguson Missouri police department or NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell or the Archbishop of Poland, recently put on house arrest by the Pope for crimes against children— we see, at the very least, a need to *question* authority. At best, it unmask abuses. It provides a greater measure of accountability. It helps keep us, and others, safe.

As much as we hate to admit it, the questions of authority that the Pharisees brought to Jesus make a lot of sense to us today. Truth be told, if we were religious leaders in Jerusalem more than 1900 years ago, we might have been compelled to ask the same questions ourselves. We would be curious to know who this man was that had healed and taught for the last three years. We would have wanted to know, then, what gave *this* man the right to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, with crowds of people waving branches and singing “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” We would have asked – if not Jesus directly, but certainly amongst ourselves: Who is this Jesus, who *had just cleansed the temple*? *From where does he get his authority to do such things*? *From where does his power come*? In spite of his teachings and his miracles, these actions are new. These actions are unsettling. *And inquiring minds want to know.*

And so in our text today, the Pharisees and Sadducees approached Jesus to question the source of his authority. They want to know what gave him the right to do these things – these new things, these scary things. We can read between the lines and see: their conversation with Jesus is grounded in more than a desire to know. We’ve watched enough Law & Order to know that their line of questioning is trying to catch Jesus up in a rhetorical trap. And although Jesus deftly sidesteps their trap, he doesn’t dismiss the need for questions. In fact, in his response, he answers their question by questioning *them*. One commentator writes:

“At first Jesus’ answer appears to be a clever ruse to escape the trap...His question, however, is to be seen not so much as an evasion as an *indirect* response. If they are able to acknowledge John’s call to baptismal repentance was truly authorized by God, they will have no difficulty in recognizing the source of his authority. If, on the other hand, they admit that they cannot see the hand of God in John’s ministry, they will demonstrate their incapacity to accept the answer he would give them.”¹

Jesus demonstrates the power of questions to unmask hidden agendas. Jesus shows how a question can invite transparency and self-reflection. Jesus’ question leads us to uncover the truth.

¹ Hare, Douglas. *Matthew: Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. 245 & 246.

From Jesus to Luther to contemporary theologians like James Cone, questioning authority has become an important practice of our faith. As Protestants, you might even say that it is in our DNA. With every question Jesus raised to the Pharisees; with every strike of the hammer as Martin Luther's nailed his 95 Theses to the doors of the Wittenberg church; with every call unmask racism or sexism or heterosexism in the church, questioning authority has been a part of our legacy as Christians – so that we, as Christians could might boldly ask the question of ourselves: *what is the source of our authority? By what authority do we have faith?*

As Presbyterians, our skepticism of human authority is embedded in our representative government – set up to ensure that there is no singular hub of absolute power within the church, and that the work of the Spirit can be discerned by the many. As Presbyterians, we applaud Calvin's insistence that *everyone* have access to scripture, not just those with special authority within the church.

Yet even as we uphold our teaching that the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are a “unique and authoritative witness to Christ”². We acknowledge that there is baggage associated with the church's expression of Biblical authority in many cases. Calvin writes:

“Since no daily responses are given from heaven, and the Scriptures are the only records in which God has been pleased to consign his truth to perpetual remembrance, the full authority which they ought to possess with the faithful is not recognized, unless they are believed to have come from

² Book of Order of the PCUSA

heaven, as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them.”³

Yet, having seen – and perhaps even experienced – how interpretations of scripture have led to abuses, marginalization and oppression of many of God's people, Womanist theologian, Delores Williams' words resonate with us too. She writes:

Womanist hermeneutics (that is the history of interpretation of African American Feminist Theologians) must take seriously the assumption that the Bible is a male story populated by human males, divine males, divine male emissaries and human women mostly servicing male goals, whether social, political, cultural or religious. Thus, when they prove the Bible for meanings relevant to African-American women's experience and faith, contemporary womanists engage in a hermeneutical posture of suspicion, just as their feminist sisters do.⁴

How do we hold together these two realities – this notion of Scripture as God-breathed, and this notion of the Bible as a tool of oppression? How do we look to scripture and the teachings of the church for direction and guidance, knowing that scripture and teachings have also been used to marginalize or oppress African Americans, women, LGBTQ persons of faith. These same words have been used to justify wars and genocides, to silence interfaith discourse, to claim the salvation of some and the damnation of all the rest.

³ Calvin, John. *The Institutes*. I.vii.1.

⁴ Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness*. 187-88

A high school student raised an important question to me at a conference this summer. She asked: *Why are there so many different interpretations of Scripture by people who all claim to be Christian? Why are some of these interpretations on polar ends of the spectrum? Why do we have such different understandings - Westboro Baptist Church teaching one thing, and our home church teaching another? Why are there so many differences if we are all following the same God?*

To her question, and into our discussion today, I lift up Paul. Shocking, I know – as so many of Paul’s teachings are expressly the ones used to condone many abuses! Yet Paul gives us a helpful answer on authority – a helpful corrective to conventional models to which the world subscribes.

Paul points us to a source of all authority that unseats the power structures of this world and show us a new way. He shows us a model of authority that is not about dominance but about service. This model of authority is not about oppression but about humility. This model of authority is not about abuse, but love.

Paul answers our questions. He answers the question of the Pharisees. He answers our questions about Scripture. According to Paul, *all authority in heaven and on earth belong to Christ alone.*

Paul teaches that in Christ we have a model of authority in which we can rejoice, in which we can take comfort, in which we can find harmony with one another. For this model of authority is concerned not with the elevation of one, but with the well-being of all. This model does not rest in the glorification of one, but all glory comes, rather, to the one who poured himself out in sacrificial love for the redemption of all.

Christ has given us a new model of authority – one not of power over, but power for. And so when we struggle to discern if a teaching or an interpretation or a strongly held belief is to have authority in our lives, we can measure it against the story of Christ’s love for all.

- Does the teaching care for those who are poor, marginalized, oppressed, judged or excluded? Or does the teaching add to their burden?
- Does the teaching speak of mercy, forgiveness and grace, or of judgment and shackles of sin?
- Does the teaching speak of an authority that is invested in the needs of the least, of a radical welcome to all – across age, gender, ethnicity, status, class, sexuality,...the list goes on? Or does the teaching try to strike dividing lines?

When we ask these questions and hold them against the model of Christ’s authority laid out for us in the Gospels, poured out for us on the cross, and professed for us in the Epistles, we see that true authority and true power comes in the form of radical, life-giving, redemptive, gracious, merciful love.

Luther has said: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”⁵ As we look at our lives – and even as we look at our world – may we take the risky step to claim the authority of Christ in our lives – over our selfish impulses, over oppressive institutions, over our fears of scarcity, over our own anxiety of being left out. And, in doing so, may we be vessels of Christ’s liberating love for all. For that is what true authority is really all about. Thanks be to God!

⁵ Luther, Martin; in *The Reformation Theologians* p 61.