

By What Authority?

Let me start by telling about a time I didn't do what I said I would do, and a time when I did what I said I wouldn't do.

The first time I made a real pledge to a church, not just the dollar or the fiver in the plate, but a pledge that would make me reach into what I could do, I reached high.

I also completely failed to keep it.

I was straight out of school, and my old car required a costly repair in January, and it took until November to finish paying for it. Unable to do what I said I would do, instead I did *nothing*.

The next year, at pledge time, a wonderful saint of the church suggested to me that there might be a more holistic approach than attempting instant sainthood through money. "Perhaps," he suggested, "I could find a figure that made me mildly nervous instead of maniacal. Perhaps," he queried, "Ten percent is a bit ambitious this year. Have you considered two percent?" Then eyeing my car with far more disdain than he ought, "Well maybe *one* percent this year."

I set an incredibly low figure, and with the pressure off, I blew right past what I said I would give.

As Laura reminded us last week, God is enough, and we are enough, and so when that pressure comes off, what does that freedom open us to do? What is our faithful response to the love of God?

This isn't a stewardship sermon; it is a *discipleship* sermon.

We all know God calls us to give, because we know God calls us to be in community, and community doesn't just happen. Jesus is explicitly clear that he calls us to love one another, indeed to love even when love has to come from a very deep place. But there is *freedom* in this service, and it is freedom from crushing self-absorption.

And with that freedom comes a renewed call to be God's people in the world, which brings to our text today.

It is a challenging text.

The text is rife with opportunities for hypocrisy. It is a story laden with opportunities for guilt, but that is not the point of the story, so I want to chart a very clear course from here.

Let me be crystal clear that Jesus' goal is not to make us feel bad about ourselves, and Jesus'

goal is not, as far as I can discern it, to coerce us into good behavior, because, well, that is a *losing* proposition.

Everything we have, everything that defines us as people: our worth, our awareness, our substance, *is a gift from God.*

That is not the behavior of one who has it in for us.

But, *at the same time*, God does want more *for* us and *from* us than what we want for ourselves, as surprising as that may sometimes seem.

Our text today is a parable.

Actually, it's a parable within an argument. The chief priests and elders of the people come to Jesus and they quiz him. They have ideas about the kingdom of God that they want to proof-text from scripture.

Not surprisingly, Jesus also has opinions on the matter. God's Word is a love-letter to humankind, so Jesus tends to be a bit tetchy when it is presented otherwise. Nearing the end of his ministry, knowing that his ministry ends in self-giving love because of the ways that crushing self-interest causes people to act, at this crucial moment, Jesus appears to lose his patience, but not his wit.

They want to know where *he* gets his authority. And really, the answer to that is the answer to it all.

When we are living for the other, when are living in a community of self-giving love, when we are working for the reconciliation of creation, authority comes from God because that is the business that God is about.

But rather than saying this, Jesus posits a question:

Where did John get his authority?

They stumble on the answer. As Tom Long puts it, "They are damned if they do and damned if they don't." He writes:

"Jesus' question was a sharp scalpel deftly dividing two different forms of authority. First, there is human authority. No matter how sophisticatedly it is packaged, it is a matter of raw power. If you have enough people behind you or guns with you, you have it and what you say goes, period. Divine authority, on the other hand, has to do with the truth, the truth of God, the truth about who God made us to be. In the short run, human authority can appear to overwhelm divine authority – even to crucify it – but ultimately, God's truth prevails."¹

Community, reconciliation, love – that is the business of God.

And there is a perpetual campaign being waged to make those seem like weak values. But

¹ Long, Thomas G. Matthew in *Westminster Bible Companion* p 241

they aren't weak values. Those are the values that make us *human*, because to be human is to be in God's image, to live as though we are about God's business.

Even more, this is near the end of Matthew's Gospel and there's something about that cross looming over the story that suggests another form of power as well.

By what authority do *we* minister? In whose name?

For what purpose?

When we commit ourselves to following the one who defined himself in relation to God and humankind, we necessarily commit ourselves to the business of God. We declare that - despite every evidence to the contrary - that the *powerful* way to be, the *faithful* way to be, is to seek others' interest over our own.

The church has always needed to speak with authority.

That is why the church must say what we are about, even knowing we will frequently miss the mark.

That is why the church most *do* what needs to be done, even if we haven't said that is what we are up to, because that is how we are *faithful*.

Faith is not about whether we have promised to be saints and failed to deliver, or stumbled into sainthood when we had other plans, faith is about whether or not we follow Jesus Christ.

Let me pause and acknowledge that a few of you might a little nervous with this *sainthood* talk. I get it, I started off talking about throwing a dollar in the plate, then we got to following Jesus, and now we are into full-blown sainthood.

It makes me nervous too.

But sainthood isn't a category reserved for the pure, it's an invitation offered to all of us, and it means to follow Jesus.

That is what we are called to do: to follow Jesus.

That is what Jesus is saying in the parable, that saying all the right words, or even believing all the right things isn't nearly as important as following where God calls us to go.

I know of people who have resisted God's call because they're afraid Christian discipleship is going to cost something.

And do you know what, *it is*.

It is going to cost *God* something.

That is what we remember at Christ's table.

We find ourselves again brought around to that pesky question, the very question they asked Jesus: By what authority do we act?

Always, we find ourselves confronted with the answer that the authority comes from God who chooses to exist in self-giving love. And even though this isn't a stewardship sermon, it's a discipleship sermon, it is good to remember that *we will never out-give God*.

We come again to this parable with its question about the one who promised and didn't, and the one who didn't promise and did, and in the end to Jesus, who *lived* promise. Let me end with these words from George Buttrick about this text: "Thus the voice of Jesus strikes upon the chaos of the modern religion like a clear bell. He shames our crude evangelism which vitiates its zeal with ignorance, vulgarity and mercenary motive. He shames the current popularizing of religion, the truckling to the curious, the dangling of a bait to catch a crowd. He shames our orthodoxy with its petty dogmas, it's imagining that the mystery of God and the ultimate verity of the cross can be squeezed within a few poor words of man's invention. He shames our liberalism with its light rejection of the hard-won truths of generations and it's fond imagining that a new thing is therefore a true thing. He shames our psychologizing of religion with its pretense of sounding the depths of the soul by giving strange names to the levels of consciousness. Across this modern Babel, this chaos and destruction, the voice of Jesus rings like a bell. Into this fetid brawl he comes like a cool wind driven across the stars. This is his message: do what you know to be right, and the ampler truth will dawn upon you as you walk. Carry your reason into sanctified energy. Fulfill your emotion into transfigured conduct. Let worship and neighborliness be the divine alternation of your life. Thus you will gain the kingdom as you help others gain it. Thus you will prove your sonship in the test of deeds."²

A hard word, perhaps, but also a *hopeful* word, because it dares to believe that God who calls us to the vineyard imagines a future more dazzlingly restored, renewed, and forgiven than we can possibly fathom.

By what authority may we act?

By the authority of the one who calls us to the table, this table offered the world over, this table of the one who promises us everything we need.

So come, dear friends, to the table of the one who did *everything* that needed to be done.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

² Buttrick, David. [The Parables of Jesus](#). P210-211