

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 1, 2023

Authoritative Action

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

From where does authority derive? That seems to be at the heart of our Gospel text today. Jesus has just taken some highly controversial actions at the start of this chapter: driving the money-changers and the dove-sellers out of the Temple. These actions were a direct attack on the religious system that helped keep the Priests and scribes funded and in power. It was also an attack on the piety of groups like the Pharisees who viewed the Temple as inviolate and sacrosanct. No wonder representatives of these injured parties are clamoring at Jesus, essentially saying, "What right do you have to do this?!"

So let's explore authority. Generally speaking we understand authority to derive from outside of the authority figure. The most obvious example of this would be in a system of democracy. The authority of political leaders derives from the people. Through elections we give politicians the right to exercise authority over the country. This same derivation of authority can come from credentialing organizations as well.

My authority as your pastor comes, in part, from both of these sources. While you did not elect me exactly, you formed a committee to interview me and either give or withhold their approval. Then you were asked to vote on extending me a letter of call. In those ways my authority derives partly from you, the people of St. Stephen. But I have also been credentialed by the ELCA to be a pastor. I have been trained, educated, background checked, and had to undergo an extensive approval process while in seminary in order to serve in this role. Through those processes, part of my authority derives from our larger church body. And, of course, I am accountable to both groups in the exercise of my authority, both you all here at St. Stephen and the VA Synod of the ELCA.

This understanding of where authority derives from seems to be what the chief priests and elders are expressing in their questioning Jesus. What outside group or organization has granted you the authority to drive off the

source of our income? It almost feels as though they are trying to determine if Jesus is a threat. Does he have a group of followers or a powerful benefactor looming behind him, ready to back Jesus up in a conflict? In just a couple of chapters we will hear Caiaphas and his associates express this very concern: “and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. ‘But not during the festival,’ they said, ‘or there may be a riot among the people.’”¹

Jesus’ response to this questioning is fascinating. In classic rabbinical style he answers their question with a question of his own. When his adversaries ask him: “**who** gave you this authority?”² Jesus responds not by asking who gave John the authority to baptize and forgive sins...rather Jesus focuses on John’s actions: “Did the **baptism** of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” It almost seems as though Jesus sees authority coming from right actions rather than from people. Specifically, actions that free people from bondage to sin and death.

Jesus seems to be teaching that all authority comes from God, but the only righteous exercise of that authority is done when it is in line with the values of God. Authority then becomes more about righteous actions that are in keeping with who we were made to be than the exercise of power over others. And the exercise of that God-derived authority is not only for our selves! Perhaps even more importantly when it comes to authority and the exercise of power, the righteous exercise of authority means helping to create the conditions for others to be who they were made to be as well.

This back and forth between Jesus and his adversaries gets followed up with this parable of two sons. The father grants agency and authority to both sons to work in the vineyard. To put a pertinent twist on the question the parable ends with: which of the two sons rightly exercised the authority the father granted them? Despite the initial words of both sons it is the first who rightly exercises the authority granted him in line with his father’s values; that the vineyard be cared for.

This is an important nuance when we put this teaching of Christ’s in conversation with the much mis-used and abused text from Paul to the church in Rome, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.”³ The cultural and historical context of that passage makes it clear that church in Rome

¹ Matthew 26:4-5

² Matthew 21:23c (NRSVUE, emphasis mine)

³ Romans 13:1a

ought to avoid attracting the attention of authorities, hoping to forestall further persecutions.

Unfortunately, that passage from Romans (along with a few others) is generally used to squash criticism and critique of authority figures. Given some previous sermons I have given, you can likely guess that I flat out reject that misapplication of such texts. And I do so, in part, because of the teachings of Christ like this from Matthew. Rightly exercised authority should be honored and obeyed. But notice the qualifier...**rightly** exercised authority. From our Christian perspective, and from the very teachings of Christ we have a definitive understanding of how authority is **rightly** exercised.

The baptisms of John were rightly exercised authoritative actions because they were in line with God's desire to free people from bondage to sin. Jesus driving the money-changers et al out of the Temple was in line with God's desire for all to be free to worship without barriers and without being taken advantage of. There are plenty of other examples of rightly-exercised authority in the gospels, every act of healing and freeing from demon possession was rightly exercised authoritative action. When Christ fed the hungry and welcomed the stranger, those too were rightly exercised authoritative actions.

If we take all of the actions of Christ as rightly exercised authoritative actions. If we see the actions that others' take that Christ commends; we will quickly conclude that there is one value above all others at work in all these authoritative actions: love. And I certainly do NOT mean the false love that many Christians today espouse. The false love that says I am going to punish you until you act the way I think is right and acceptable.

Rightly exercised authority involves freeing people to be who God made them to be. Rightly exercised authority means loving people for who they are and supporting them in their journey of faith and life. Rightly exercised authority means dismantling the barriers and walls that we place between one another, and that we place between others and God. Rightly exercised authority means caring for those without authority or power.

Notice that all of this has to do with actions! We often get hung up on the words of authority and pay little attention to the actions (or inaction) that accompanies them. There are all sorts of headlines right now about the people in authority over us in Congress. What would it look like for us to ignore the bombastic words of our leaders (words that are often as meaningless as those of the two sons in the parable) and pay closer attention to their actions. And as we view those authoritative actions, we have clear

instructions from Christ as to how we are to measure them: love. The sort of love that allows people to be who God made them to be. The *agape* love that we know from God; the unconditional, freeing, and eternal love that made us and gave us the capacity to share that love with others. Our singular purpose: love. Amen.