

Integrity

October 1, 2023

On Whose Authority?

One of my favorite Packers stories happened in the summer of 1994. I was living and working on campus at St. Norbert that summer, and if you've ever been on those grounds, you know that they are lush and lovely. Being both bold and broke, I decided that I was going to pick some flowers out of one of the gardens for my room.

Now, I tell you, this was very deliberate and intentional – I packed scissors in my backpack when I left my room that morning. As I was riding my bike home after work, I stopped at a particularly lovely rose garden, laid my bike down, got out the scissors, and was just about to snip when the sun was blotted out and I heard what I thought was the voice of God, but what turned out to be Reggie White (you can understand my initial confusion) saying, “I don't think you should do that little girl.”

I looked up in terror and said, “Of course Mister White,” stashed my scissors, and didn't even zip up my backpack as I pedaled furiously away.

Now, Reggie White was no campus official. He had no official authority. But you'd better believe I wasn't going to disobey him. Not only were the power dynamics all in his favor, just imagine how disobeying him would anger the football gods!

In our Gospel today, the religious authorities ask Jesus, “On whose authority are you doing these things? In the way that Matthew orders his Gospel, Jesus had recently cleansed the temple, throwing over the money changers' tables and had once again returned to the temple. The religious leaders were keenly aware that Jesus' ministry was a disruptive force to their authority, and so we start to hear these grumblings and attempts to trip him up. When I read this passage this year, it strikes me that the religious leaders feel their authority shaking, and it is Jesus' authority that they question.

So very often, when people are acting out of fear and greed, what they choose to attack says more about what is going on in themselves psycho-spiritually than it does about their actual grievance. Here, they try to attack Jesus' authority because their own authority is on shaky ground.

There's an old joke that someone asked a rabbi, “Why do rabbis always answer with a question?” The rabbi's response was, “Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with a question?”

Jesus, being the good Jewish teacher that he was, answers the religious leaders' question with his own question. He trips them up by refusing to be baited. As I parent a toddler, I employ this tactic often. She'll say, “I want a cupcake” and my response will be “Doesn't dolly want to go for a bike ride?”

When Jesus responds to their question about his authority with a question about John the Baptist's authority, he does so knowing that the leaders are fearful of losing the crowd based on

how they talk about John. John was a crowd favorite. What's particularly interesting here is that Jesus then launches into a parable about right speech versus right action. Is it better to say the right thing, but then not deliver or to disappoint someone with our speech, but then do the right thing?

The crowd listening to Jesus understand. Doing what is right is superior to saying what is right.

Which brings me to a follow up on my Reggie White story that I'm not proud of. The day after the Minister of Defense's shadow blocked out the sun in the St. Norbert College rose garden and I told him he was right, I went back. This time, I made sure it was during practice, when he would be busy, and I cut some flowers. I told him what he wanted to hear, but then I did what I wanted anyway.

I could fabricate a moral to this story, tell you that the roses brought an infestation of ants or that they made my room smell awful, but the truth is none of that happened. They brightened up my room.

But maybe the moral of this story is that obedience and right speech because of fear rarely results in changed behavior. It may defer the behavior, but it doesn't bear fruit long term.

But you know what? There's a third and better way, better than disappointing someone with our speech but then coming through with our actions, and that is behaving with integrity, having our words match our deeds.

Scott and I have a couple of relatives who behave exactly like the sons in Jesus' parable. One household, when invited to a party, will say, "Absolutely! There's no way we'll miss it!" and then fifty percent of the time they cancel at the last minute. The other household will respond to the same invitation, "Well, I don't know. If I'm feeling okay, or if the weather is good" and they invariably show up.

You know what? Both are disruptive relationally. In both responses, the words not matching the deeds sow hurt and distrust – one in the present, the other down the line. So, what if our takeaway today is to work to have our words match our deeds?

World Communion Sunday

Today Christians all over the globe are celebrating World Communion Sunday, a celebration that was initiated by a Presbyterian pastor in 1933 to encourage followers of Jesus to come together around what unites us rather than what divides us. To bring people together to remember that there is always enough room at God's table, that no matter what divides us, we are one in Christ, that we are responsible to and for one another.

Our Old Testament reading tells the story of Moses getting water from the rock. The set up is that not only are the people thirsty, they're accusing Moses of leading them into the desert to die. They're thirsty, but they're also being brats. They know how awful life had been in Egypt, how brutal their taskmasters were, but when we're uncomfortable, when we're wanting, it's easier to play the blame game than simply live in our discomfort. Moses, for his part, behaves with integrity, listens to God, and responds to their need.

What does this have to do with World Communion Sunday and Jesus' parable about right speech versus right action? The fruits of a life following God's ways are needed now more than ever across the globe. The world is in turmoil, and living lives of goodness, kindness, justice, love, joy, peace, and generosity is the only way humanity is going to find its way out of this mess. We need to be focusing less on the power aspects of authority and more on quenching the thirsts of everyone around us.

Conclusion

On this World Communion Sunday, more people will celebrate around God's table than on any other day of the year. We gather as the people of Morocco continue to suffer following the earthquake there last month, and as so many suffer because of both natural disasters and human caused climate change. We gather as so many struggle with addiction and the chaos that brings. We gather as politicians seek to legislate sexuality and identity and bodily autonomy because of power rather than compassion. We gather as friends and loved ones are hurting in body, mind, and soul.

Regarding Communion, Augustine said, "Behold what you are, become what you receive."

We are God's beloved. And in Communion, we are invited to become that ever more deeply, that the life of Jesus, who embodied the love of God so profoundly, will course through our veins, that God's peace, joy, justice, and love will be what animates us, what gives us energy, what bears fruit in our lives.

Friends, our scriptures today invited us to turn our attention from issues of power and authority, issues that are largely based in fear and greed and scarcity, and toward integrity and bearing fruit. My prayer this week is that we will find ways to live lives of integrity, and in doing so, that the ways of Christ which nourish us at this table will ripple out into this world that God loves so much. May it be so. Alleluia and amen.

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