By What Authority?

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Matthew 21:23-32 ~ October 1, 2023

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” As institutional gatekeepers, the pharisees feel threatened by the presence of the living God in their midst. No wonder. The question will soon be turned upon them.

The question of authority in religious matters is potent today. Two articles last week: *The New York Times* reported the growing number of people sharing their faith in the corporate workplace. As companies give attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion and invite employees to bring their “whole selves,” some are claiming their faith as a matter of identity. Their authority comes, perhaps from God, certainly from within.

Two: The Episcopal Church released data from the annual parochial reports – the church’s census – tracking trends of the past decade. As seen across much of Christian America and representative at St. Columba’s, while the number of active parishioners is in dramatic decline, commitment is strong, giving is strong; those who are in are all in. People who identify as spiritual but not religious are often claiming, in effect, that their inner experience of holiness is more compelling than congregational or institutional practices.

Put the two articles together and one might reasonably conclude Americans are leaving church, claiming their authority, and sharing their faith. What is the Spirit up to? We are at a time, akin to the practices in Jesus’ day, with the temple undergoing reformation and reorientation.

By what authority? We have received the truths of the Gospel, the teachings and practices of the church bequeathed from generations before us. And we have our own experiences of the holy, however fleeting, that inspire our longing for God. How shall we hold these external and internal truths together, in tension? And as we do so, nurture a community that lives, loves, and serves together? A compelling, if daunting, undertaking for our day! ‘Tis a gift for us to hold the tension, together: holiness comes alive as we are in relationship with one another.

Created for love, I see each of us coming together to shape a giant, living jigsaw puzzle. Each, a distinct colored piece, unique in gifts, offering to share what we have received – our respective charisms, if you will – a charism understood to be an extraordinary power given to a Christian by the Holy Spirit for the good of the whole body. Each gift, each voice, each piece of the puzzle.

God creates wheat, grapes; we make bread, wine; offer these to God, who blesses; offers body and blood; and we are made one, whole, together, in God. The glory of God is made real not by some institutionally ordered, top down process, but by the offering of each member, given freely, inspired by our relationships with one another and the grace and life of this community.

It’s a curious parable Jesus tells of the two sons. We don’t know why the one said yes, then didn’t, nor why the other said no, then did. But there’s no doubt about the better course; just do it. Just do it. I am less and less interested in what you tell me you believe or who you believe in. Rather, show me; show me how you live. Then I will see and know what you believe; I will know who and what you value. “Which of the two did the will of his father?”

If you want to know what I value, look at two things: look at my calendar and look at my bank account. I’ll tell you what you’ll find: that it’s a pretty mixed bag – ways that I use, invest or spend my time, my talent, my treasure that are true to and reflect my values and beliefs, my relationships and heart, and other ways… well, not so much. So, I’m kind of liking Jesus’ parable right about now, because I’m hearing that whether I said I would and I did not, or said I would not and I did, or maybe one voice within me one day and one the next, Jesus is ever offering the opportunity for a new way, a fresh start. Jesus isn’t asking what I said, what I promised, even what I believe. Jesus is looking to see if I’m going to act. And act today. Will he or won’t he?

In casting a vision to *Live God’s Love,* we, collectively, have sought to weave our varied dreams and voices into a single piece of music, one that inspires and guides us forward together. The church – this church – offers a way of connecting to something far greater than ourselves, encourages us to offer healing and hope to a world in need, and binds us in mutual accountability. It’s not all neat and tidy. That’s part of the beauty; we’re a church that values deeply the struggle and the difficult questions. We’re a church where it is safe to doubt and name those doubts, where it is safe to believe and to name that belief, safe to step out and try.

The vision is precious beyond measure. The community is alive, robust, engaged. The love of God, the Way of Christ, and the winds of the Holy Spirit are powerfully alive among us.

So, I have an ask: I ask you to invest in this vision. Please know that I know that some of you have so much more than you possibly need, and I know some of you don’t have enough to make payments coming due this week – for real. I am asking every single one of you to make a financial pledge to the ministry of this church as a way to help bring about the vision God planted in our souls. I’m asking you to listen to your heart, then act. Step out in trust. The vision of God will not be realized until everyone’s in. We cannot get there without one another. The goal of our vestry, our elected leaders, is 100% participation in pledging among all our members, and if you think you’re not a member, let me help you become one; let me help you act today on the faith and vision in your heart.

Because God is the one who has given us life, given us time, talents, and treasure, what we do with these gifts is holy. If you think I’m mixing spiritual matters of the heart with material matters of the church, then you’re right on the mark, for this human vessel, this community of St. Columba’s is altogether holy, the embodiment of Christ, even with our dings and scratches.

A vital part of my own spiritual practice is to give 10% of my income to the work of God through the Church as my pledge, and together Sarah and I give to a number of other organizations we care about. When I first embarked on this path of stewardship, I was giving a mere fraction of one percent and could not imagine giving even two percent. Time and again Jesus reminds us of the vision within and calls forth our generosity. At every step, greater generosity is met with deeper gratitude and abundance. Henri Nouwen confirmed my own experience when he said, “You won’t become poorer, you will become richer by giving.”

As if this were not enough, I have two additional “asks”: the first is directed especially toward those who may be waiting for the “right” moment to get involved in ministry here. That moment is now. If you are not yet participating, please join in today. Second: our vision to Live God’s Love prompts us to make some changes to our property to better enable us to be the community we are called to be. Please tell us, what do you think about the ideas being proposed? So, I have three requests of you: to give, to participate, to share your hopes and ideas.

By what authority? Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.