

October 1, 2017
Pentecost 17
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32
By What Authority?
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Fellow Ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
Gracia y paz de Dios, Padre, Hijo e Espíritu Santo
Grace to you and peace from God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

Question Authority!

Often seen on bumper stickers and t-shirts in the late 1960s, thanks to the controversial 20th century psychologist Timothy Leary, this slogan was originally uttered by the Greek philosopher, Socrates. Leary as you may recall, was one of the most influential icons in the counter-culture of the late 1960s. It was a culture that largely grew out of opposition to the Vietnam War. Leary gained influence primarily among Western youth by advocating the use of LSD and other mind altering drugs as a way to escape from the burdens of what he saw as a crumbling society and an increasingly corrupt U.S. government.

Originally intended to encourage people to participate in the democratic process by engaging in honest and civil dialogue with those in authority, Question Authority became the rallying cry for a generation that had become cynical and jaded by the activities of those who were making the rules.

Psychologists today suggest that the pervasive and often self-serving questioning of authority has ultimately resulted in widespread societal dysfunction.

Might we have gone too far in questioning authority?

The religious leaders of 1st century Jerusalem would appear to have gone too far. It was and still is the obligation of religious leaders to maintain right and good order in the church. The Pharisees were doing exactly that when they questioned this young, itinerate preacher, Jesus of Nazareth.

“By what authority are you doing these things?”, they ask. “These things” included upending the temple marketplace, curing the lame, sick and blind who came to him and stirring up such excitement among the people that he was feted as “the son of David” in a huge parade!

The religious leaders wanted to know how this man had managed to elicit such ardent accolades and who gave him the right to teach and heal.

Oh, wait, they knew! They knew because John the Baptizer had already told them. They knew, because they had read it in their holy book there will come a Messiah . . . a savior to free Israel from her oppression. Yet, they questioned Jesus’ authority. They were so full of themselves and their positions, so jealous of their privilege and power that any disruption of the status quo was seen as a personal threat.

In their zeal to question the authority of Jesus’ ministry they overlooked the source of their own authority for ministry. They were so firmly entrenched in their power and privilege that they missed the point of Jesus’ question. They embodied the pitfall of Timothy Leary’s 20th century philosophy. A philosophy that aggrandizes the self and diminishes one’s ability to cooperate with others. It is just such behavior that Paul warns against in this letter to the Philippians. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, regard others as better than yourself”.

Humility! What a concept, right? Not false modesty, but true humility, like that of Jesus Christ who emptied himself...and became completely obedient to God's will.

What does it mean to "empty oneself?"

Imagine this, here are two sons, dad asks them to go to work in the family business. The first one says no way, not happening . . .then reconsiders and quietly goes to work. The second one says sure thing, dad, I'll get right on it . . . then toddles off to do his own thing. Each of these sons went only half way to doing what their dad asked them to do. The first did the father's will by his ultimate action, the second did the father's will by his initial word. Neither one of them fulfilled their father's request, Both of them shamed the father.

Both of them took advantage of their relationship with the father to subvert his will to theirs. Well, Jesus is God/divine and Jesus is human/incarnate.

In contrast, Jesus Christ who is God/divine and human/incarnate, at the same time, subjugated himself completely to God's will. He emptied himself of his own desires and ideas and plans to do the will of God.

At the same time, Jesus does not exploit his relationship with the God the Father, instead he obediently carried out the ministry of the Father, even to death on a cross. And God responded by raising him from the dead.

To empty oneself is to set aside status, pride of place in society, family connections and prestige that is based on human measures. To empty oneself is to avoid abusing those markers of privilege. Instead, we are to use our privilege, power, wealth and authority humbly for the good of the whole community.

These religious leaders failed to recognize that their authority comes from God and must be used for the advantage of the entire community.

Their concern was for their own privilege as they fretted over the consequences of their answer to Jesus' question. If they admit that John's baptism is from heaven, then they admit that they have rejected God's prophet. If they admit that John's baptism is from earthly authority they risk an uprising from the devoted followers of John and Jesus.

The parable of the two sons points us to the hopelessness of human will, and to the astonishing grace poured from God through Jesus Christ. Neither son did the father's will, AND both sons were loved by the father.

Knowing that God's grace is for everyone, absolutely everyone, are we free to repeat the sins and the failings of those who have gone before us or are we called to repent, as the first son did and get busy in the vineyard?

Pastor Ed Markquart of Grace Lutheran Church, Seattle says *The vineyard, the world, is always in a mess.*

There are always earthquakes in Haiti and California.

There are always wars in the Middle East and rumors of war in the Ukraine.

There are always divorces and families falling apart.

There are always poor families living down the street, with not enough money and emotional resources to get by.

Add to Pastor Markquart's list hurricanes in Texas, Florida and the Caribbean. How do we as a church respond?

Pastor Markquart speaks an uncomfortable truth as he answers

Too often, we merely hold our worship services in the middle of the vineyard.

We have our Bible studies and small group studies in the middle of our brokenness and follow it up with a pot-luck supper and forget to invite the stranger or to risk going out of the parking lot and do something good for someone who will never have the capacity to pay us back.

We do good things at the same time that we fail to do God's will. We are, as Martin Luther says *simul justus et peccator* – Simultaneously justified and sinful.

It is only by the authority of a gracious God through Jesus Christ that we are invited to this table where we receive forgiveness for our sins and assurance of reconciliation with God and one another.

So, Should we “Question Authority”? Yes! Question the source of the authority that is self-serving and blind to the needs of the whole community. Question the authority that would oppress and marginalize any of God's children.

Proclaim instead the authority, the power of Jesus Christ to lift up the lowly and humble the arrogant.

May we daily pray with the Psalmist teach me your paths, lead me in your truth and do not remember my SINS, but remember ME in your mercy.

Sisters and brothers, God is at work in you, giving you the strength, the will and the courage to do what is good and just.

Thanks be to God.