Sermon - Who Is In Charge Here? – 10-1-2017

Pause and Reflect…

 “Well, who died and left you in charge?” one little boy said to another. “Yeah right – I don’t have to listen to you!” He continued, – “You’re not the boss of me!” an adolescent girl tells her friend. - “Just who does she think she is,” a wife tells her husband over dinner after a miserable shopping trip that day. - “We’ll show him that he can’t brag all the time about being the best at everything, he won’t be invited to come on that fishing trip we are planning next year” a man tells his friends and coworkers about the guy who is the brownnoser.

All of these sayings are familiar and childish in one way or another and typically used to put people in their place. Anyone who gets too bossy or too full of themselves, or thinks they are more important than another usually gets their authority checked in one way or another, often in passive/aggressive ways. Authority can be complicated -- it has to be both given and claimed, in a two-part process. It can be used to reassure or to disturb, to calm or to exacerbate, to cultivate hope or for pure self-promotion.

One Conservative News writer put it this way about the latest Political Scandal of the week: “As we’re seeing with President Trump, immigration and travel bans are one thing -- but we don’t want the president to meddle with football. Our civil religion, sports, is off-limits. Over the weekend Trump took on the NFL, criticizing players who take a knee to protest during the national anthem. He (Trump) rescinded the traditional White House invitation to the NBA champion Golden State Warriors after Warriors star Stephen Curry indicated his reluctance. Even LeBron James, whose Cleveland Cavaliers lost to the Warriors in the NBA finals, came to Curry’s defense. It was quite a weekend; “On Sunday morning, the president was tweeting to all football fans to boycott NFL games.” Instead of abiding by the “authority” of the president, a number of football owners came out to the field over the weekend to show solidarity with their players during the national anthem.”

This dispute then spilled over beyond the bounds of NFL and into the general political arena and the post hurricane situation in Puerto Rico and left much of the country questioning why the president would weigh in on this topic at all? This topic joins the many other topics have been called into question regarding the Authority of the office of the President of the United States, since Mr. Trump has taken office. This certainly makes for a divided nation, which is something that many agree to be the state of our nation at the moment. It seems that even Mr. Trump has some awareness that this job is more involved than anticipated and he may also have realized that one can be have responsibility and authority, but respect is not automatic nor can it be demanded or even required of the citizens of this country – with authority comes responsibility or is it the other way around? With responsibility comes authority!

Jesus is seen by others as having the authority to heal and teach, but in today’s lesson the chief priests and elders question this authority. By answering their question with a question about John the Baptist, Jesus is not putting them off, but instead inviting them to come and join him in discussion, he also makes a connection between himself and John the Baptist, along with the prophets of the past. When the chief priests and elders respond, they are making a political statement rather than a statement based on fact because of the intense belief of the people following Jesus – saying they didn’t know was safer politically than saying he – Jesus - was wrong. To save themselves, they respond by saying “we do not know.” The chief priests and the Jewish leaders come from a place of authority when they ask Jesus their question. Speaking from a position of power within the Jewish world, they seem to recognize Jesus’ inner authority, but still want to know where Jesus authority comes from.

I came across this well-known story, but even if you have heard it before its message still rings true loud and clear:

In U.S. Navel Institute Proceedings, which is the magazine of the Naval Institute, Frank Koch illustrates the importance of obeying the Laws of the Lighthouse. Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. Frank Koch was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow."

"Is it steady or moving astern?" the captain called out.

The lookout replied, "Steady, Captain," which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The captain then called to the signalman, "Signal that ship with the following: 'We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees.'"

Back came the signal, "Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees."

The captain said, "Send: ‘I'm a captain, change course twenty degrees.'"

‘I'm a seaman second-class, ‘came the reply. You had better change course twenty degrees.’

By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, ‘Send: 'I'm a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.'"

Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse."

We changed course.” -Max Lucado, In the Eye of the Storm, Word Publishing, 1991, p. 153.

Who’s in charge here? The captain outranked the seaman second-class but the lighthouse outranked the battleship by being an obstacle and a danger. The religious leaders saw the possible threat of responding to Jesus question with an answer which would have been negative, the people might have become upset. It is hard to know, they, religious leaders, may have also believed something about what Jesus was teaching and preaching – but we don’t hear about that. Jesus is in the last week of his life. He has aggravated the established powers by clearing out the temple, in Matthew’s timeline, and now he’s back, he isn’t hiding or keeping quiet. He comes to the place most significant and sacred to these authorities, and pokes at them by teaching there.

As one commenter writes; “Their own authority in Israel, after all, had been given to them by God in the time of Moses and passed down for generations; thus, for Jesus to say ‘By God’s authority’ would be to offer an answer easily refuted on biblical and traditional terms” [Kathryn D. Blanchard, in Feasting on the Word (Year A, Vol. 4), p. 116]. But Jesus’ non-answer question back to them implies that his authority comes from the same place as John’s. Now they’re caught. Whatever they say about John, they know, will also apply to Jesus. They choose not to answer, and a little more of their authority slips away from them.

Moses, struggled too with his authority. He’s caught between God and the people who are on their way to freedom. The people complain to him regularly, and he has to carry their complaints to God. When they’re thirsty, the people start to wonder if God is with them or not, in spite of all that God has already done to get them out of Egypt and keep them safe. Each new challenge raises their fears again.

For both Jesus and Moses, authority comes from somewhere -- or Someone. It grows out of a direct connection with God, and both Jesus and Moses use their authority in service to a Benevolent God and God’s people. Moses’ gift of water in the desert, and Jesus’ gift of wisdom in the temple, extend their authority out from themselves to people in need. If we understand them – Moses and Jesus - as examples for our own faith, they give us a pattern for the use of our own authority, bestowed on us – given to us each day - great or small – to reflect a benevolent God each day!

So far, no one has died and left us in charge of the world – well, except for Jesus, death on the Cross and Resurrection. It is through this cross that we have our inspiration and we exercise our authority given to us by God. Lately I have heard that the Hurricanes and Earthquakes are caused by God’s anger or wrath – some say that God says or does this or that, yet the benevolent focus on the Cross and the Resurrection seem to be missing. All of which is being spouted is vengeance and judgement based on Earthy and selfish views. As children of God, we live in the “Cross Hairs” of God’s Grace – everything is to and in essence centers on the benevolent God who gives us life as a gift, so we can share this gift of life with others - any authority we have come from a benevolent and loving God! Amen!