

Jesus on the Way to the Cross, II: True Authority

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John 7:2-19, 30-39 RSV

Now the Jews' feast of Tabernacles was at hand. So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." For even his brothers did not believe in him.

Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil. Go to the feast yourselves; I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come." So saying, he remained in Galilee.

But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, "Where is he?" And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, "He is a good man," others said, "No, he is leading the people astray." Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him.

About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught. The Jews marveled at it, saying, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" So Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. He who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood. Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?" . . .

So they sought to arrest him; but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come. Yet many of the people believed in him; they said, "When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?" The Pharisees heard the crowd thus muttering about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him.

Jesus then said, "I shall be with you a little longer, and then I go to him who sent me; you will seek me and you will not find me; where I am you cannot come."

The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we shall not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, 'You will seek me and you will not find me,' and, 'Where I am you cannot come?'"

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

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On these Sundays in Lent, we're following Jesus on his way to the cross, through the pages of the Gospel according to John. John's Gospel has a special emphasis on *the truth*: what's genuine, what's reliable, what can we count on? So our studies are focusing on what Jesus tells us about *the truth* on his pathway toward the Passion. Last Sunday we pondered his teaching on true worship. The next two Sundays we'll look at what Jesus tells us about *true insight* and *true sacrifice*. Today we'll consider the question of *true authority*.

The issue of authority is one we face across the whole spectrum of life. And we face it at every stage of life. Young parents speak of the "terrible twos" — the stage when the toddler seems determined to test the authority of his parents. It's a time when the parent's vocabulary seems to be reduced to one word: "No!" It doesn't stop when the child grows out of toddlerhood — in fact, it gets worse, at least in our culture. One of the hardest things for parents to deal with is that time when their sweet little child turns into a strong-willed, defiant teenager or young adult who does things we don't want him to do, or doesn't do some things that we, in our greater wisdom and life experience, think he should do. Of

course, a little reflection will remind us that it's only because *we* dismissed the authority of *our* parents that we know when our child is making a bad decision!

We never outgrow our battle with the authority question. Even as Christians we recognize that we don't always respect the authority of God, the authority of his Word. We find ourselves behaving in ways that we know aren't what the Lord intends for us. As we'll pray in a few minutes, "We have left undone those things we ought to have done, and we have done those things we ought not to have done." When we use the word "ought," we recognize that in our own sinful tendencies we're really dealing with an authority problem. If there's no authority, there's no *ought*, and anything is permitted. If we're the source of our own authority, nobody else can tell us what we "ought" to be doing. And that's where many people we know are today: they're a law unto themselves. "Nobody can tell me what to do."

We face the authority question, not only as individuals, but also as a nation. This week the Supreme Court issued a ruling about the death sentence for minors that overturned the laws of nineteen states — laws that were enacted by legislators elected by the people. Of course, that's not the first time this kind of thing has happened; we have only to recall the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1963. When nine people — actually, only five — in Washington, D.C. can override the legislative process, we don't have a republic any more, nor a democracy. Some years ago the journal *First Things* printed a symposium calling attention to this "judicial usurpation of politics," and it has only become more pronounced as time goes on. And when people want to take the words "under God" out of our Pledge of Allegiance, it's clear that in our nation we have an authority problem.

And we have the problem in the church as well. Who governs the church? Christians have divided over that issue. In theory, Christ rules his church. But, as someone has said, "In theory there is no difference between theory and practice, but in practice, there is." And, in practice, the church has split over whether Christ's authority is channeled through bishops — especially the Bishop of Rome — through elders and ministers, or through the vote of the congregation. And so we have Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, Pentecostals and all the rest. As Congregationalists, we're a little suspicious of forms of church government that allow a hierarchy to impose its agenda on the local church. So, in our practice, each church is independent of a bureaucratic denominational structure, and we make decisions as a whole congregation. But it would be a mistake to think that the Congregational principle is go-it-alone independence and majority vote. Our congregational government is only a means through which Jesus Christ is to rule his church. As Jesus told his disciples, "You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ" (Matthew 23:8-10). The New Testament church didn't take votes. Instead, they operated by another principle, stated in Acts 15:28: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." They listened for the voice of Christ through the Spirit, and acted accordingly.

Any form of church government will work if hearts are humble and the voice of Christ is heard. *None* of them will work if people are in a power play, grasping for authority of their own and ignoring the authority of the living Lord. Some churches, especially Baptists, are governed through a Board of Deacons, and often a pastor finds his hands are tied in ministry because his church is *deacon-possessed*. Our church isn't like that! Our deacons are not possessors, they're *servants* — God bless them! And our Council of Elders and all our Boards are servants, too. That makes it a pleasure to work with and *serve* a congregation like this.

But the issue of authority never really goes away, in any facet of life. Whatever we do or say, we must do it with some kind of authority. If we act on the wrong authority, we can get ourselves into trouble. A policeman, for example, must act on the authority the governmental entity has granted to his law enforcement agency. If he tries to act on his *personal* authority while performing his duties, he's creating an authority problem. I belong to several Internet groups of railroad fans. Recently there were a lot of messages on one list about some railfans who were apprehended by security people while photographing trains at a Metra station. The police pulled them in because, they said, it's against regulations to photograph trains in the post-September 11 era. The railfans weren't trespassing; they

were on a public depot platform. So they pursued this all the way up to Metra officialdom, and it turned out the police were wrong and were reprimanded. They weren't enforcing Metra regulations, they were just throwing their weight around. When we do that kind of thing, we have an authority problem.

We have to act on authority. The question is, whose authority will it be? If it's just ours, we're in trouble. We may think we're right about something — or that we have a "right" to do or say something — but we may be deceiving ourselves. As Jeremiah the prophet stated, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). We need to examine ourselves constantly to see if the weight we're throwing around is only our puny weight, or the weight of someone more weighty!

It's a paradox, you see. We have *more* authority, not less, when we're submitted to a higher authority. A Roman centurion sent to Jesus, asking him to heal his servant. While Jesus was on the way, the centurion sent friends to tell him, "Lord, don't bother to come to my house. I'm not worthy of that! All you have to do is speak the word, and my servant will be healed. I'm a man set *under* authority, with soldiers under *me*. When I say 'Go' they go, and when I say 'Come' they come. And when I tell my slave, 'Do this,' he does it!" Jesus held the centurion up as an example of faith (Luke 7:6-9). The centurion understood that by being *under* authority, he *had* authority. And he recognized that Jesus had authority over sickness and unclean spirits because he was submitted to the Father's authority.

Jesus expresses that very thought in our Gospel lesson this morning. "My teaching is not mine," he tells us, "but his who sent me; if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. He who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood" (John 7:16-18).

What moved people about the presence of Jesus — at the human level — is that he was close to God, and had yielded himself to the will of his Father. That allowed him to speak to his people in a fresh and powerful way. As Matthew puts it at the end of his account of the Sermon on the Mount, "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7:28-29). The scribes and Pharisees were experts in the Law and the traditions that had clustered around it, but they didn't have the attitude of *servanthood*. In Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican, it was the Pharisee who prayed, "Lord, I thank you that I'm not like other men, a sinner like this tax collector over here." That's not the attitude of servanthood and submission to higher authority.

Jesus told his disciples, at the Last Supper, "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27), and he set the example of service in washing the dusty feet of his disciples. Even for the Son of God, the pathway to authority was the pathway of servanthood. As Paul says, "Being found in human form he humbled himself and *became obedient* unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:8-11).

We have real authority only when we're submitted to the will of our heavenly Father, and using our gifts and skills to bless others. Calling attention to ourselves, insisting on our way "or else," dominating other people like a tin-horn dictator — these aren't the signs of authority but the signs of *weakness*. Don't be fooled by people who act like big shots and try to boss you around; they're only revealing their own insecurity. They have less authority because they're not in submission to a higher authority. When we try to throw our weight around, we forget there's a weightier One. The Hebrew word for "weight" is the same as the word for "glory." It's only our glorious Lord who really carries any weight in the affairs of his universe.

That's why Jesus declares, at the end of our Gospel reading, "He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" When a stream of life-giving servanthood flows from our innermost being, that gives evidence of real authority in our life. It's the authority of the Holy Spirit, the Giver of life. It flows out of our heart, but it doesn't come from there —

not from that sinful, deceptive heart of which Jeremiah speaks. It comes from the heart of our Father, and from the Son who reigns at his right hand. To have this true authority, we need to believe in Jesus “as the Scripture has said.” We can’t remake him into a reflection of our own prejudices or ambitions, or mold him according to the shape of our agenda. He must be the Lord, the “the head over all things for the church” (Ephesians 1:22), the one to whom is given “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18).

In a moment we’ll gather around the Table of the Lord, who is our Head — the head of our family. As we do so, let each of us look into ourselves to ask if we’ve placed our life under the authority of Christ, and our heavenly Father. Let us come humbly, confessing our sin and asking forgiveness of the only One who can grant it. For it’s only as we yield to the authority of the living God that we will know, in our own lives, any true authority.

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