

Sermon - 09/19/2021

Ps 1; Pr 22:17-21; Ja 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mk 9:30-37

True Authority – 17th Sunday after Pentecost

When we meet Jesus in the Bible we see the character of Messiah, that is the Christ, the anointed One – and the character of those who are not just fans of His, but who choose to be transformed – to be changed – to become His true followers. Not fans, but followers. The Bible is not a rule-book. No, the Bible is the great story of God at work among God's people – at work among all people. The changes created in us when we read the Bible are what God has been looking for all along.

The New Covenant in Messiah does not break with what the Bible has been showing us for thousands of years in the Old Testament. Jesus chose the shame of the cross – to become the sacrifice that offers the love of God to all humanity. The Bible teaches that because of what He accomplished, His Heavenly Father honors Jesus above every other being in the world. Honor shines forth from the soul who is as trusting and as vulnerable as a child. The natural mind – the mind apart from God's grace – does not grasp this. The disciples didn't understand.

We understand the difference between honor and shame in our time. Honor goes to those who achieve success, strength and power in this world of ours. Shame comes upon those who have little, who have earned no rank or privileges, and who are helpless in the swirl of the world's marketplace. It was somewhat the same in the 1st c AD, but not exactly. In those days, children were not honored and valued as they are today. At the table, adults were served first. Children waited and were last in line. The child with least status served everyone else. Children were property, as were women. These customs don't apply to modern society. It was radical for Jesus to set a little child in the middle of His quarreling disciples and tell them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (v 35) Seriously? What a blow to our ego – a blow to our self-esteem. It was shocking to the disciples who heard Jesus that day. Embrace shame, not honor? No thanks.

Jesus teaches the disciples (and us) that to welcome those who live in dishonor and shame is to welcome Him. And, to welcome Jesus is to welcome God into the midst of your fellowship – into your heart – into your life. What Jesus says goes against the values and the customs of His disciples and everyone else at that time. We are experiencing the reality of Christ's authority in this story. And it is shocking. It should be.

Christ's kingdom moves against the worldly kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven is counter cultural. The two kingdoms cannot rule side by side. When the kingdom of Christ comes, the worldly kingdom has to go. You and I need to trust in that truth. We live into it.

Jesus' authority is established in His obedience to God's call. His authority is established in His humble acceptance of all those He meets. Jesus did not compete for an invitation to the governor's banquet. He did not cultivate a relationship with the senators and lawyers of the Roman government in Palestine. Jesus touched lepers. He ate with prostitutes and tax collectors – people who were hated in polite society. He healed the deaf, the blind and the lame – those without honor – outcasts of society.

Christians today work hard to establish the "authority of Scripture." We believe in the Bible – the Old and New Testaments. I believe it. But, again, the Bible is not a rule book. When faced with a moral dilemma or an ethical question, you and I cannot thumb through the Bible and find a specific "answer." Rather, you and I are called to steep ourselves in the narratives and the many stories of the Bible.

This is the way Scripture shapes our life – our understanding of God – our understanding of ourselves – our view of the world. Imagine that you are a soldier. You get up early, prepare for the day, put on your uniform and report to your commanding officer, expecting orders. Imagine that instead of shouting a list of orders at you, the sergeant says, "Once upon a time..." Not what you expected! In the same way, the Bible is not a fast-acting corrective nor an answer source to the question, "What should I do now?" In the narratives of the Old and New Testaments we discover the power – the

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authority of God – that shapes us to be God’s people in the world. Jesus, as a man in the world, had authority over all kinds of evil by the grace and lovingkindness of the Holy Spirit – God within Him. The working of God’s goodness is mysterious. It is not always slow-moving either. We see times and places and circumstances where God moves swiftly and powerfully to bring about God’s will. Working in and through people.

The Apostle James continues in his letter to the churches contrasts the worldly way of thinking and behaving with humble acceptance of God’s authority over all things through Christ. Notice that when we take to heart being “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, being filled with mercy and good fruits, without partiality or hypocrisy” then we begin to look like Jesus.

If we as the church do not bring the whole Gospel story to the world, then people are in danger of going for “Gospel-light,” the low calorie – flavorless story of a mild, wise man who went around doing good in ancient Palestine. What a shame. We are called – we are commanded to bring the whole story – the entire story of Jesus Christ. He reveals the truth:

“...He was teaching His disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill Him, and three days after being killed, He will rise again.” (Mk 9:31)

He says He’ll die and be vindicated on the third day. This is the heart of the Gospel story. The very emblem of shame and loss – a Roman cross used for criminal execution – has become a sign of victory over sin and death. This is the power of the resurrection. The authority of God.

Christ has authority over every evil thing – even the final cruelty of death. All authority is God’s authority – real authority – which the Father has handed over to Jesus Christ. Under His authority we trust – and obey – and worship. This is the God we share with everyone we meet. Amen.