

January 28, 2018

The Authority of Love

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth be meditations to our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

AMEN

SERMON

As we continue our journey through Epiphany, Jesus continues to be revealed to the world. In the reading for today, we have Jesus and the disciples at Capernaum and he goes to the synagogue. Now as you know his teaching, although he does call for repentance, calls for forgiveness, he also is putting forth a new teaching. That is an invitation to be a part of the kingdom of God. The kingdom that is brought near to the people in his very being.

And so, when he teaches in the synagogue the people are listening to something that they have not heard before. The scribes would try to enlighten the people as far as the law of Moses, would try to enlighten them as to the prophets. But Jesus stands up and he speaks to them about what God is now doing.

That God is inviting them to be a part of a next step, of a new covenant. A covenant that will bring them as part of God's kingdom here on Earth, with a promise of entering into the fullness of God's kingdom in heaven. And they are astounded by this. This is different from what they have heard before. And as we know from where we stand in history, some heard such teaching and embracement. Hearing the authority with which Jesus spoke and they embraced that as wanting to be a part this new covenant, this new teaching to be a part of God's kingdom.

And others weren't nearly as quick to embrace it because it made them uncomfortable. They were being called away from where they have lived their lives up to that point. Where they have seen themselves as the chosen people of God and that they were simply being encouraged to embrace the law more and more in order to satisfy the covenant. And so, they were being told some would embrace this new teaching and some would not.

Now coupled with this is that Jesus not only teaches with authority but in this particular instance a person with an unclean spirit has come into the synagogue. And the unclean spirit recognizes Jesus as more. He is not simply one who has been raised up. He is fundamentally different. He is as the unclean spirit says, "the holy one." What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the holy one of this world.

And Jesus silences the unclean spirit. This is something that the people have not seen before. The unclean spirits have seen people convulse, they seen people who are out of their heads, but now is someone who not only the unclean spirit recognizes as something more but one who has power, has authority over the unclean spirit and exercises that authority. To come out, to go away, and it was so.

And that is something new and that is something different. It is coupled with the teaching that Jesus is bringing about the kingdom of God. And it shows that he has God's authority to bring this invitation about God's kingdom to the people.

The question of authority is one that is dealt with through every generation. In the synagogue, they are impressed by how Jesus teaches with authority, how he acts with authority.

In the first century church, where people are hearing both Jews and Gentiles, hearing the gospel, and some are trying to decide if this is a new authority. The Jews are wondering if this is a new authority from the God that they have known and in covenant with. And are they now being asked to change what they know and believe about God and what God has called them to. To believe in Jesus as the Christ and the Messiah and what does that mean for the living of their lives. How is it different in what they have done and how they have lived before?

The gentiles, many of whom have come from different Pagan religions, have heard the gospel. They embrace that there is one all-powerful, all-loving God, and they want to be a part, they want to accept the invitation to be a part of this God's kingdom. And they are mixed together in a congregation.

We hear from one such congregation, a congregation in Corinth. Paul is the one who established that congregation. He is the authority that they know, that they embrace. And so, when questions come up about the living of their lives, how are we to be the kingdom of God? How are we to live that out? What is our authority? They turn back to Paul and ask him questions, right and left. If only we had the letter that was sent to Paul, some of this that Paul says might make a lot more sense to a 21st century ear.

But what we do have is his response and in this particular section of the letter to the Corinthians that was read this morning. We hear Paul addressing an issue. And I believe that at his heart and soul it's a question about authority. He begins in what was written this morning about talking about the difference in knowledge. And knowledge in and of itself is not a bad thing. Knowledge is good, it helps us to deal with the world around us. But knowledge without context is what Paul refers to when he says that knowledge puffs up. We can know a lot of things,

we can know many, many things. But if it's not under authority, if it's not in a context than it's not as useful.

And the context that Paul sees is the context of love. Knowledge builds up or puffs up, but love builds up. And Paul is all about what good for the common good, for the community. All the gifts and talents that are given are for the common good and we see that, we understand that, we define that by the love of God.

It is God's unconditional love for creation, for all people that brought Jesus into the world. It is that context and authority of God's love on us, the Corinthians, 1st century to take our knowledge and put it into context the authority of God's love so that we are looking out for one another.

And so, when Paul talks about those who are not in the same place, have not gone as far in their journey in faith are still questioning whether these idols are really God's. They're still questioning if their faith is strong enough in this one true God. To be able to wipe away all those thoughts of this idol being a true God. And being able to eat food that has been dedicated, offered to this idol.

And so, Paul tries to get the church, the people to understand that just because you have knowledge it has to be under the authority of love. Deal with one another kindly. Even though that you know that those idols are nothing real. And that to eat food that is being offered to them will be nothing to you. Not everybody is there.

And so, you and your love for your brother or sister are called to refrain, not because it's detrimental to you but because it's detrimental to them. That's the authority of love, that puts knowledge into context. That helps the people to have the common good in mind for one another. Where we don't simply put ourselves first like the world tries

to tell us we should. But to have all the strongest and the weakest in mind when we are dealing with the world.

I think in our day and age the question of authority is being raised again. We've seen it over the course of the history of the church, in the Great Schism of the church. In 1050, there was a question of what is the authority? Who is the authority? And there was a break in the church because in the Roman scheme of things, believe it or not, the clergy were the authority. How is that for a scary thought? (Laughter) They were the ones that defined what was right and what was wrong. They were the authorities that were seen. And some good things came out of that, and some very bad things came out of that.

Move forward 500 years and we have what's called the Reformation. Again, it was a question of authority. Should the Pope really define who the church is and what the church is about? The reformer said no, the real authority is the scriptures.

And for another 500 years that was the authority. If it's not in the scriptures, then it ought not be part of the church. And there was only one way to look at the scriptures, or so some said. And that is why we had so many breaks in the church, because we couldn't even decide exactly how this authority of the scriptures should be read and interpreted in our lives.

And some would say, and Phyllis Tickle who was a theologian, she wrote a book on the emergent church. She is no longer with us. Her book says we are in the midst of another question, what is the authority in the church? Because we can't agree on what exactly or how exactly to interpret these very old scriptures in contexts that are not familiar to us.

What is the authority? And I believe that we as the church, not just the Episcopal church but we as the church universal, is dealing with that question even as we speak. And I have a tendency, I am inclined to believe that our presiding bishop Michael Curry may have defined the authority of the church for our time when he says, "If it's not about love, then it's not about God."

It's not terribly different from what Paul was saying to the 1st century Corinthians. We may have all kinds of knowledge, but it has to be under the authority of love that opens our hearts to not only members of the church but to all people. We are called to use our resources, we are called in all that we say and do. To be under the authority of God's love, not just for me, not just for us, but for all people.

That could be a very difficult thing to do. Some people if you haven't noticed are hard to get along with. (Laughter) They don't all believe like I believe or that we believe. Some hold life in less-esteemed than others. And we have seen so many instances where because of differences in faith, people are being killed. And yet we are called under the authority of God's love to care, to be forgiven, to be open, to be compassionate, to be just, to be merciful. And there are many ways to do that.

In this particular congregation over the last couple of years we have been under the authority of God's love as we have looked into the world and said we can make a difference. We make a difference in the outreach that we do in our community. We made a difference without judgment when we raised 5000 dollars for a well in a community that we're not familiar with, with a group of people that we don't know, and can't judge as good or bad but simply know that they are people in need. And we have the resources and the will to say we can help. And

so, we raised 5000 dollars so Episcopal Relief and Development could put a well in a community. And make life better.

We don't know if they deserved it or not. We simply gave it because it was the right thing to do under the authority of God's love. Last year, we raised money again. Took our hard-earned dollars and bought a herd of goats. And we make it fun. I'm still not really pleased with being called an "old goat" but you know if the shoe fits. (Laughter)

We gave those to a community we weren't familiar with. We don't know where they went exactly. We only know that Episcopal Relief and Development sees a need out in the world and asks the church under the authority of God's love to share its resources to help a group of people deserving or undeserving, we don't know. It doesn't matter, they are God's children. And we have been able to help.

This year again we are going to be doing another project. It's coming up, we are going to be celebrating Episcopal Relief and Development not on the day they suggested but on the 4th of March. We will have a new program I believe it's called "Nets of Love." "Nets for Live." I may change it simply because love is the theme today. Nets for Life is to raise money to have nets to keep the mosquitos away to inhibit the spread of Malaria. It's not an issue we have to deal with here in Florida anymore, used to be. But we again won't know the people that will receive these. We only know that there's a need.

And that God calls us to be aware and to be loving under the authority of love. To help where we can. Authority is a question that we deal with every day of our lives. As Christians we are asking ourselves as a church what is the authority for us? I would like to think and hope and pray, that for us it is the authority of God's love and by that authority we are called to reach out. To be working for justice, mercy, forgiveness. Helping those that need help not because they deserve it. Not because

we know this is the person that is receiving our help and we approve of who they are. But simply because there is a need. We have resources and by the authority of God's love we are bringing those resources to bear on people's needs.