**By What Authority?**

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**Philippians 2:1-13:** If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

**Matthew 21:23-32:** When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, `From heaven,' he will say to us, `Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, `Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, `Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, `I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, `I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

You just heard our lectors end their lessons with, “The Word of the Lord.” You just heard me end the Gospel reading with, “The Gospel of the Lord.” But what if somebody stood up and asked, “How do you know that’s from ‘the Lord’? People wrote that stuff down, didn’t they? They were people like you and me. What makes their words any more from ‘the Lord’ than yours or mine?”

That’s not a convenient question. I’d just as soon not deal with it right now, since we’ve got a show to put on. And you might prefer that I didn’t ask it out loud, either, right in the middle of a service.

The trouble is, though, I didn’t come up with this question. Jesus did. Jesus asked it when we heard “The Gospel of the Lord.” Well, thanks, Jesus. You really know how to mess up a liturgy.

Of course Jesus wasn’t the first person to ask that question. Somebody else asked him first. During his last days in Jerusalem, Jesus walked into his own people’s version of the National Cathedral, without any official credentials, and started teaching as if he were the Presiding Bishop. Imagine sitting in a classroom waiting for your professor, and in walks some scruffy-looking stranger who may not even know how to read, and he starts lecturing on Shakespeare. Or imagine the same stranger walking in here today and out-racing me to the pulpit, where he starts preaching to you like a know-it-all. (I toyed with the idea of having somebody do that, but I chickened out.) That would bother you, at the very least. It would certainly bother me. *I* want to be the know-it-all!

So maybe we can sympathize with the chief priests and elders. They’ve got their own ordination process in place, and their own search committees, and Jesus hasn’t been through any of that. Sure, he has a following, but so what? Any rabble rouser can get a following. Maybe if he had acted like a Messiah—you know, marshaled an army and kicked the Romans out—they would have made an exception for him, but instead he shows up with a bunch of traitors—that’s what tax collectors were—and prostitutes in his entourage. So it’s natural to ask him where he gets off acting like an instant expert. We wouldn’t mind an answer ourselves, would we? When is it OK to say, “The Word of the Lord?”

Well, sorry, he didn’t answer the question. He asked another question. That’s so like him! You may have heard the story about a rabbi who always answered a question with another question. Somebody finally objected, “Rabbi, why do you always answer a question with another question?” He answered, “What’s wrong with a question?” You see bumper stickers that shout out “Christ is the answer!” But that doesn’t fit the Gospels very well. Jesus didn’t answer too many questions. He preferred to ask them. He preferred to tell stories that left everybody puzzled. When he stood to teach outdoors or in the Temple, he didn’t lecture, he provoked. In a way, his whole life was a giant question mark—God coming to us as an executed criminal who won’t stay executed. Try to make sense of that one!

Jesus asks, “What about John the Baptizer? He didn’t go through any search process either. Was he on an ego trip? Was he fooling himself? Or was he sent by God?” It’s an awkward question, and Jesus knows it. John was popular with the crowds, but the established leaders didn’t buy his act. Jesus asked them a question he knew they couldn’t answer publicly. So they said, “We don’t know,” and Jesus said, “Then you’ll have to keep guessing about me too.”

We tend to like stories about Jesus challenging the established leaders. But here you are listening to an established leader—an ordained Priest—reading from a collection of books picked by an earlier generation of established leaders. Only the story tells you not to put that much stock in established leaders! Jesus asks, “Does John’s baptism come from God, or is it of human origin?” And then he leaves us wondering about what we’re doing today. Is it from God, or is it of human origin?

We certainly know that you can’t factor out the human side of what we do. Putting on a collar and some flashy vestments doesn’t make me infallible, I’ve noticed (and so have you). Putting leather and gold leaf on a book doesn’t cover up the fact that the Church took over 300 years of all-too-familiar petty squabbling to decide just what to put *in* that book. Your search committee knows more than it wants to about the “human origin” of your search process. You’ve been praying for the wisdom to discern who’ll be your next rector, and after sifting through the paper work and interviews, all you’ve got are some hunches, some inklings. Or at least none of you have told me that you saw a 900 foot Jesus telling you who to pick. (And if anybody had said that, the rest of us would suggest therapy.) A Church that might not even exist if Henry VIII hadn’t wanted a divorce can’t afford to pretend that it’s not exceedingly human.

We’re here, though, and we’re here because we believe, or would like to believe, that, to use St. Paul’s words, God is at work in us, even as we find ourselves working out our own salvation. Paul tells us that all this way too human stuff we do reflects God’s work among us. That’s why a little reverence, a little “fear and trembling,” is appropriate. When we’re working things out for ourselves, it’s not just us. God is at work among us. Not a God who wears flashy vestments (aw, shucks!), but a God who sidesteps every privilege in order to live with the likes of us, even at our worst, in order to keep returning and luring us beyond our self-serving habits. When you look at how exceedingly human we are, at how exceedingly human our trappings and our sacred books are, what other God could we ever hope to meet?

Paul tells us that our final authority rests with the God whose teaching-style and relationships and even life turn everything upside down, including our ideas of authority. Authority doesn’t come from threatening to hurt us if we disagree; authority comes from promising never to abandon us, no matter how much we disagree, even with God. The word of the Lord is a word from somebody who refuses to act like a lord, so when we end a reading with “The Word of the Lord,” we should hear that as an invitation to listen for that kind of authority—an authority that won’t put you down when all the conventionally decent people shun you, an authority that lures you and those around you beyond self-serving habits. The word of the Lord happens among us when we find ourselves drawn into a shared life where nobody—not even God—lords it over anybody else.

Of course you don’t have to end readings with “The Word of the Lord.” You can just say, “Here ends the Reading.” That’s safely neutral. But some of our newer services suggest ending with, “Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.” I prefer that one, actually, and that’s what we use at the campus ministry. It invites you to listen more actively, maybe even to wrestle with what you just heard, not to just sit there passively and say, “OK. Sure. Whatever.”

Jesus told his critics another story about two sons. Their father tells them to help out. The first one refuses but then changes his mind and decides to help out anyway. The second agrees to help but never gets around to it. Which of them took their father more seriously? Everybody picks the first son, and that’s no surprise. But do we ever stop to ask why the first son changed his mind and decided to help? He apparently was not in the habit of doing what he was told. And he apparently felt free to say no. So why do it? I’d guess it’s because he knew the work needed doing, and he cared about that. The second son was more agreeable, but he didn’t care enough to follow through. The first son found himself drawn into a shared life where nobody lorded it over him, certainly not his father, but he heard what the Spirit was saying to him anyway: “This needs doing. Why not help?”

So is what we’re doing from God, or is it of human origin? Maybe that question isn’t such a big deal. After all, nothing of human origin is a stranger to the God who comes to us in Jesus. We hear that story turning everything upside down, teaching us by provoking us, drawing us into a shared life where nobody—not even God—lords it over anybody else, charming us to walk in love as Christ loves us. Why wouldn’t we call that the Gospel, the good news, of the Lord?

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people. Thanks be to God.