

*What do You Believe?*

Shepherd's Grace Church

September 28, 2014

When Jesus had come to the temple, the Chief Priests and elders came to him while he was teaching and asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gives you this authority." Jesus replied, "I will also ask a question. If you answer, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. Was John's baptism from heaven or was it of earthly origin." They debated among themselves. "If we say John's baptism was from heaven, he will ask, 'why then did you not believe him.' If we answer that it was of earthly origin...we are afraid of the crowds. Everyone regards John as a prophet." "We do not know," they answered. "Then neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first son and said, "Go, today and work in the fields." The first son refused to go but later changed his mind and went. The father went to the second son and said the same thing. The second said, "I go, sir," but he did not go. Which of these sons did the will of the father? "The first," they answered. Then Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of God ahead of you." John came in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him. The tax collectors and prostitutes believed him but even after you saw it, still you did not change your mind and believe. (Matt. 21: 22-38) (Also read Phil 2: 1-13)

*What do You Believe?* In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he left little doubt. This Jesus who emptied Himself seeking not to be equal to God, seeking only to do the will of God is the one worthy of Paul's allegiance! This Jesus who humbled Himself, coming only to serve and not to be served...this Jesus alone is worthy of Paul! This Jesus, filled with compassion and love, this Jesus who put all ambition aside, who derived authority from his actions and not his position, this Jesus alone is worthy of Paul. It is this Jesus whom Paul commends to you this morning! It is this Jesus whom Paul points us to, whom Paul implores us to believe? Does Paul make his case? Are you convinced because of the powerful poetry Paul writes? Are you convinced because of the music?

"Come, now is the time to worship!

Come, now is the time to lift our hearts!

Come, just as you are in worship!

Come, just as you are before our God!"

"One day every tongue will confess!

One day every knee will bow!

But until then the greatest treasure is for those who gladly chose Him now! Come!"

It is beautiful music! We all know music tames the savage breast! Music is a powerful motivator but is it the music and the words...or is it something more that draws you to make a decision about who God is in your life? *What Do you Believe?*

Believing means that we accept something as true! Believing means that we consider something as a fact! Facts are those things that cannot be doubted, disputed or proven false! When we ask, *What Do You Believe*, we are really asking what is truth! Truth, when talking about life is that which is authentic to the original. In this day when the world argues that there is no one truth, that truth is relative, life argues that truth is absolute, undeniable, and available. Life argues that truth is trustworthy and worthy of our pursuit! Truth is complete and whole and deserves our allegiance! In John 18, Pilot asks Jesus who He is. Jesus says he is a king but not in this world. If he were king in this world his followers would be trying to free him but he is not a king in this world. Instead he has come in to this world to speak the truth. All who seek him seek truth. Pilot asks, "What is Truth?" *What Do You Believe?*

The truth is the world does not believe the truth. The world believes in relative truths. The world believes in moral ambiguity! The world accepts that truths can change with time and that they are accepted differently in different times! The truth is the world does not want the truth because the truth can cause the world to function differently! The truth, if accepted as absolute can make the greedy feel guilty. It can make the gluttonous feel ungrateful! It can make the wicked aware of their own flaws and foibles. The truth upholds the validity of God's law and God's law convicts the world. What Pilot did not know, what the world does not know, what we need to remind ourselves of today is that the truth is not a judgment! The truth is not bound up in the law! The truth is guided by love and love does not judge...love forgives, love hopes, love endures, love believes!(1 Cor. 13) "What do you believe?"

Last week, Dana brought flowers to the altar in memory of her sister, Rhonda. She shared that this would have been Rhonda's birthday week and invited all of us to remember her. The flowers symbolize for Dana, a beauty that she remembers in her sister, a beauty that she wants all of us to remember and perhaps, hold close in our hearts. Those of us who knew Rhonda have little difficulty remembering. She came to us late in her life and she came seeking an opportunity to find God...God whom she had known but whom she also turned from. She wanted to turn back to God and to make amends regarding her life. Those of us who walked with her in that last part of her journey in this life all have memories of her struggle, of her passion, of her hope for God's forgiveness and acceptance. Today, perhaps those of us who knew her are reminded of these things. Those, however, who did not know her are left only to wonder. Those who did not know Rhonda do not have an allegiance to her journey. We can respect it but we struggle to follow it.

In much the same way, for this entire month you have looked at the sunflowers that I placed on the altar. As you have observed in your bulletin, they are in memory of my brother Steve. Steve was born and was killed during this month and every year I have been a pastor, I have placed these same flowers at the altar in memory. The flowers were at his graveside and somehow they came into my possession. I remember about Steve that they were always his favorite and I know they represent for him and for me the state we grew up in, the state we love and the kind of life we choose to live because of how we

were shaped in this place we call Kansas. I know Steve believed in that life and that he worked for that life because it represented for him certain values that were essential to who he was.

One of those values was a sense of humor. Steve loved to laugh and he loved to play practical jokes. He had no problem organizing a group of us to lift a little Austin Martin car and high center it over a downed telephone pole so that when a friend returned from a date, that friend would be stranded and have no way to get home. He had no problem waiting to watch the outcome of that joke. He enjoyed the frustration on the part of the friend and the animated if not somewhat irreverent language that came from his mouth at about 1 o'clock in the morning as he realized he was going to have to call his father and explain why he was going to be late for curfew. He also had no problem with making sure enough of the rest of us stayed with him, out of sight so that just when the friend was about to knock on my parents door he could reveal himself and admit his responsibility in the prank, call the rest of us out of the bushes and lift the car off the pole. Part of his values were in the heart he had for others and while he was willing to aggravate his friends he was never willing to watch them get hurt.

Another of Steve's values was of justice. To this end, he became a lawyer. He believed in the law and believed the law could make life better for all people. He worked for the law and loved it and what it represented. In it, Steve saw justice. He recognized that justice came slowly and sometimes at a heavy price, but he believed that it was worth the price. His Kansas values taught him the truth about justice. His values taught him that it was for all people and he spent his life doing all he could securing it for all people. His passion for justice was a truth in his life! It was authentic and he gave authority to the law which he served.

None of you here today knew my brother. None of you had occasion to come in direct contact with him. When I tell you stories about him, you listen and you relate not because you know him but because you know me. You believe me because you have come to trust me, you have given me authority to stand before you and share God's word and when I choose to use stories of my brother to help make a point you allow me the privilege...you give me the authority to do so. If you notice the word authority, you will realize it has in it the same root as authentic. Both words come from the same place, both come from the same root, authos, Latin for author or original. Both words represent the truth! Both represent that which is worthy of belief!

When I exercise the authority to share these stories it is because you expect them to be authentic, to be accurate, to be true! You give me the authority to share them because you are willing to accept my desire to represent them in the most authentic way possible and you give me authority to do so. Did you catch that? Did you hear what I said? You give me authority to do so! You authorize me to read, to study, research and to represent the word of God as accurately as I possibly can. You give that authority to me!

The truth, the authenticity of that statement is that authority is always given. People will not, perhaps, cannot allow authority to be taken from them. Truthfully, people do not like to give authority at all. Most of us do not like being told what to do! Most of us would not have liked my father's reaction when he heard all the commotion outside our house the night Steve orchestrated the practical joke on his

friend. Most of us would not have liked the raised voice or the threatening tone but in hindsight, most of us would have recognized, as did my brother, the authority he had given my father! I could not have used that language, that tone, that command of the situation with my brother. He would have paid me no heed! Because of the respect my father commanded, Steve gave that authority. Steve believed in my father's right to give him instruction, even if the instruction was in a manner that was, shall we say, not entirely pleasant!

Authority is given but authority in one thing does not mean authority in all things. Yesterday, I was talking with Eldad, one of the foreign exchange students staying with us for a couple of weeks. He asked me what it was like to be a pastor. We had an interesting conversation about it but more than that it got me thinking about this issue of authority. I recognize that as pastor, you as members of the congregation give me authority in some things. I also recognize that you do not give me authority in all things. I cannot, for example take the money from the offering today and put it in my pocket. You have given that money and you trust our church to use it, but that trust is not passed to me just because I am pastor. It is a trust we share, an authority we use together because we do not do ministry alone. We have an organization in place to help determine God's will, and not our own for that which we offer!

Perhaps, I can say to some of you, "Move to another chair," and you will do so. You give me limited authority in this way but only to the point where I make it clear why I am asking you to move. If I just ask you to move week after week without connecting your movement to our worship, you will decide at some point not to move. You will deny that authority. Our nation was formed for such a reason as this. Great Brittan continued to tax, to oppress without explanation and without benefit. We finally decided they had no authority to do so. To reclaim that authority, however a formal break, a struggle for separation was required! In our *Declaration of Independence*, there is a phrase that seems to be at the heart of every other phrase written. "When in the course of human events it becomes evident that wrongs are being perpetrated against others, we have the responsibility to set those wrongs right!"

We have not only the right, but the responsibility to our fellow humans to recognize and respond to wrongs that we see, to sever the bonds of authority and substitute instead an authority that perpetuates life for all people. We do not just have the right to such action, we have the responsibility! WE have the authority as human beings and it is given not by the power of kings. It is an inalienable right given by God!

This is what Jesus was teaching this morning! This is what we should take from the parable! This is what we should take from the context of the conversation between Jesus and the Chief Priests and elders. Listen. He came to the temple. If you go back to read the verses leading up to v. 22 this morning you will discover that he had been in the temple before. A few days earlier, Jesus entered the city. He entered as Zechariah said he would, "humbly, riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." He entered to shouts of hosanna and to the waving of palm branches! He entered amidst crowds of his followers in a triumphal procession down from the "Mount of Olives."

The town was already abuzz from the events at the other end of town. There, a Roman appointee, a puppet, given authority not because of his willingness to care for others but because of his willingness to

submit to the oppression of others entered the city. This one did not enter in humility but in pomp and circumstance amidst the procession of great white steeds and dozens, perhaps even hundreds of men marching ahead of him. This one was not humbled by the authority given but rather he was hungry for more! The one who processed from the other end of town took his authority and because he did, because "Rome" did, it was no authority at all. The procession at the other end of town was a model of power, that which is taken by force, not of authority which is given. Power and persecution lead to oppression. Authority given through a willing acknowledgement of the need for rule leads to equality and respect.

At one end of town, people stood and stared out of fear. At the other end, they shouted and waved out of a fundamental acknowledgment of God's sovereign rule! "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" At one end of town, everyone knew who entered the city, at the other end, they asked, "who is this?"

When the "authorities of the temple" asked Jesus by what authority he was doing the things he was doing, things like driving the money changers and revenue producers out of the temple, they were not concerned so much with his action as with the action of the crowd! The crowd proclaimed him "Son of David!" The crowd had proclaimed authority to him. The crowd, these men knew could change the balance of power, remove their authority, change their way of life! The controllers of the temple were concerned not for the sanctity of the temple but for the security of their own skins!

"By what authority do you do these things and who has given you this authority?" the men in charge wanted to know! Jesus, recognizing their insecurity asked them a question, a question he knew would bring them back to the crowds of whom they were afraid. "Was John's baptism from heaven or of human origin?" At the question, those in power but not in authority argued among themselves. I say they were not in authority because of their fear. Those acting out of authority have no fear. They know they will be respected. Those acting out of fear know they have no real authority. They are acting out of power and coercion!

They know they have acted outside of the authority that might have been given them. They have not acknowledged the heavenly authority given to John. They have not repented and made themselves worthy of their positions in the eyes of God! They have enjoyed the trappings of the world while misleading the people of God! Malachi makes indictment against this kind of abuse of power saying that the priests no longer serve the temple or God but themselves. They do not walk with integrity. (Mal. 2) They know they cannot say John's baptism is from heaven because Jesus will point out to those he is teaching that they have not believed heaven and have not recognized the power of God!

They also know they cannot say the baptism is from earth because as we already have noted, they are afraid of the crowds! They cannot answer the question because they are not willing to change their lives, let God be in control and let God's will be done! They are not ready to give up the trappings of the world and submit to the authentic and original source of authority. Because of this, Jesus says, "Neither am I willing to acknowledge your authority!"

My brother Steve would not have been willing to recognize another authority. In that moment of the practical joke, he was caught up in his own power. He put himself above the authority of our father and exercised the power he had taken to play the practical joke! In that moment, he did what he wanted, we did what we wanted because we knew no authority!

In the parable of the two sons, Jesus poses a question to those who perceive themselves to be in power! Which of the sons did the will of the father? The reality is that both sons sinned! Both deliberately and willfully disobeyed the word of their father. Neither honored their father in that moment. Both deserved to be punished and put away from the father. One however, changed his mind. One repented and responded to the will of the father. Is that one absolved of the guilt of his sin? According to the law, he is not! According to the law, he disrespected his father to such a significant degree that the father would have had the right to take him to the gates of the city and have him stoned to death! That would have been justice!

The other son lied to his father. The other son also lied to himself. He said, "I go sir." But he did not go! Instead, the second son exercised his freedom to reject the authority of the father. The second son also rejected the new responsibility given him when the first son refused to accept the responsibilities of his inheritance. The first son was to have control, authority over all the father's possessions but he rejected that which was his by refusing to go! The second son then, even after seeing what the first had done rejected what was offered and willfully chose to exercise his freedom, a freedom by the way that he did not possess!

When Steve played his practical joke, both he and I sinned. Our father told him not to play the prank. He did it in defiance. I knew that our father had told him not to play the prank. I went along and willingly chose to disobey. Both of us were guilty. When dad yelled at one, he did not spare the other. Both of us were punished. That is where the similarity to Jesus' story ends however!

In Jesus' story, the one who recognized the will of the father and eventually put God's will above his own short term pleasure, the one who repented of his rejection of God, that one was welcomed through God's grace to receive the kingdom! The one who came out to John and received John's baptism as if it was from heaven, no matter how vile his sin, that one was forgiven and was invited to be part of the "Glory of God!" That one was able to participate fully not because of the authority the one exercised but because of the authority given by God to the one who took upon himself the sin of the world! We receive God's grace not by the power of the water but by the fire of God's passion, by God's love for us which comes not in judgment but in love!

The first son was forgiven because he repented and responded to the will of his father. He was restored and regained his place as heir. The second son, the one who saw the error of the first and watched as the first repented and was reconciled still chose to ignore the authority of the father. The second son could not, would not repent because it meant a change in lifestyle. The second was unwilling to make the change, to acknowledge that the authority exercised actually gave freedom rather than taking it!

The second son could not see that the authority exercised by the father was for the benefit of the child. He refused to accept that there is a need for discipline in life. Steve and I refused to accept that with the

practical joke we played. Our father punished us but eventually allowed us the privilege of being restored to our rightful place. That is God's invitation this morning! The authority we have is not authority we can take. It is authority given, given by a God who wants us to see the benefits of entering the kingdom and choosing to enter because of God's great love!

By what authority did Jesus do the things he did? By the authority of those who proclaimed him King of Kings and Lord of Lords! By the authority of those who shouted "Hosanna in the highest!" Those who chose to repent and acknowledge the power of God have given him the authority! One day every tongue will confess! One day every knee will bow! Today, however, we can acknowledge God's power in our lives! Today we can give him the authority to forgive our sins and welcome us into the kingdom. Each of us has to work out our own salvation in fear and trembling but we do not work it out alone. We work it out together! WE work it out in church! We work it out as we begin to understand what we believe! We work it out by talking to one another and by doing our ministry together in the name of the one to whom we give all authority! We work it out as we continue to ask the question: "What do you believe?" Amen!