

Meg Ingalls

Christ Church Rockville

Proper 25A

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By Whose Authority?

Ten days until election. Folks have lined up on one side or another, and they have lined up for early voting and at election drop boxes and in front of their televisions to listen to the news—or to walk away from it—depending on their predilection.

And our news is filled with issues around wild fires in the west that are destroying land and homes and habitats and who and what is responsible for those devastating outcomes, of who has the authority to do what in the midst of such crisis. It is filled with news of yet another hurricane forming and heading toward our Gulf Coast that has been hit again and again this summer, the folks hardly finding their way back to torn off roofs and water soaked edges and downed trees and overturned mobile homes and signs ripped from their posts and tears of despair --unless they are lucky enough somehow to have come through unscathed and need to help their neighbors through their crisis.

The news is filled with reports of Nigerian police turning on its citizens and killing them during a peaceful protest, and we stand incredulous until we look to our own shores and remember that our own record is not pristine when it comes to such actions. Black lives matter, LGBTQ equality before the law (even Pope

Francis agrees now), women marching, concern for judicial nominees. And we cry out, where is the authority? Who is in charge? Where does one line of authority end and another begin?

Even in our own backyard here at Christ Church we deal with issues of authority. Will we be opening up safely next week, and how are we making that decision? Who will be in charge of letting people come in, will we be properly socially distanced and wearing masks? Has our epidemiologist given us consent? Who will put signage on pews to be used? Who will be streaming the service? Who has charge of the streaming? Who has control? And with our vestry and staff, questions of who is in charge of what, what are the channels of the exercise of authority, and what is the upshot when those channels are not followed; these are the questions being asked? And does any of it matter? Does any of it matter?

The stories in scripture that we have for today say that it matters—or at least it mattered to both Moses and Jesus. Moses, if you recall, was the one who under the authority of the voice of God in a burning bush, left his home in Median and returned to his birthplace to challenge his adopted family and its sovereign for the authority to take the Hebrews from slavery to freedom. He succeeded in the first part of his task, but it was 40 years later before he stood on Mount Nebo and looked across the land to where he had sought to bring them and let them go forth to live fulfilled lives. He stood there knowing that his authority was coming to an

end and he must pass it on. He stood there seeing as far south as the Negev and as far north as Mount Hermon and as far east as the Mediterranean Sea. It is a vast and imposing sight to stand there and see all that land laid out and know that this is the promised land given first through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and now, once more to Moses, who must hand over the reigns of authority before his part of the task is done.

And Moses does this. In his famous discourse, Moses hands over the reigns to Joshua, son of Nun, who will lead them down the mountain and across the Jordan where they will build an altar to God, draw straws for tribal lands, create a tribal confederacy that will sustain them through the years until a monarchy is born, and will, as Joshua challenges them, “choose you this day whom you will serve.” He adds that he and his house will choose to serve the Lord, that is, Yahweh. And all the people agree. Their authority is chosen. They will live into the covenant with God: Yahweh will be their God and they will be Yahweh’s people: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One*, becomes their mantra, their battle cry, their Shema said twice daily as a mitzvah, a religious command. And they choose to abide by the 10 commandments given on Mount Sinai to guide their lives in terms of relationships with God and one another. The people choose the authority of God and God’s commandments.

Jesus close to 1400 years later comes onto the Hebrew scene. He is a Jew in the truest sense. He prays the Shema twice a day. He follows the commandments. He impresses the religious authorities as early as 12 with his knowledge of the Torah. He became a rabbi calling disciples unto himself and teaching them and others as he walked throughout the region not only teaching but healing. Jesus understood the authority of God and often chaffed when he felt that authority was being abused or manipulated. His most famous brush with authority had to do with turning the precincts of the Temple where women and Gentiles were allowed to pray, to worship the one true and living God, into a mercantile paradise. He came unglued and turned tables over and asked why the authorities had allowed this to happen to a house of prayer. In some ways his protests screamed the spiritual lives of women and Gentiles matter.

Of course, the authorities challenge him: who gave you the authority to do such a thing? Who gave you the authority to teach on Temple grounds? And Jesus turned yet another set of tables on them...who gave John the Baptizing One authority—heaven or human. These authorities knew that if they said heaven, they would be challenged as to why they did not then, as spiritual leaders, listen to him; and, if they said human, they knew the people would challenge them because they thought John to be a prophet. And so they could only say they didn't know.

Jesus then goes on to tell several parables that deal with issues of authority in the presence of those who had challenged him and others who had come to learn from him, ending with the parable Carol preached on last week that has that wonderful phrase most of us know by heart: render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's.

Realizing that Jesus is challenging their authority, they then attempt to trip up Jesus, asking him which of the commandments is greater. Jesus who says the Shema daily—*Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One*—paraphrases the Torah and the Ten Commandments saying, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind*. Jesus knows that for the Hebrew people, Yahweh is the authority, the one of first importance, that without Yahweh life does not exist, life is something other. Jesus knows that in the Hebrew faith, Yahweh is owed everything—not a bit, not a tithe, not half—but everything—all of our love from every source of our being—heart, soul, and mind. It is what those first 4 commandments are about in the Ten Commandments. It is What Love Requires. It is what is expected.

But Jesus does not stop there, he also reinterprets the last six of those same commandments saying, *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*, to which he adds: *on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*.

Jesus has upped the ante for the Pharisees. He has shown that he not only knows the foundational statement of the Hebrew faith and believes and lives by it, but that he is aware of the other commandments and wherein lie their value. Not only that, he has raised loving one's neighbor to the level of loving God. That is what love requires. And that is a radical statement. Let me say that again: Jesus is making a radical statement in saying that to love one's neighbor is in fact equivalent to loving one's God, to loving Yahweh. On this alone the Pharisees could choose to call him a heretic, to in essence excommunicate him, to isolate him from the Temple.

But before they can react, Jesus does once more what he does so well: he turns the tables on them and asks them a question. After all, they are the learned ones, they are the ones with the answers, they are the ones in authority, they are the ones the people are meant to come to with their questions for definitive answers. And so Jesus asks, *What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?*

Now this is a trick question if there ever was one. The Pharisees challenging Jesus know that through the centuries the one thing that the Hebrew people have to hold onto is the prophecy of Nathan gave to David that his line would rule for ever. No matter whether they were one kingdom or two, if they were captives in Babylon, or now living under Roman rule, the Hebrew people held onto that one promise in hopes of restoring the authority of rule in which they held hope. And so

the Pharisees answer with the one answer they hold to be true: The Messiah will be the son of, or in the lineage of David. I'm sure somewhere in the back of their minds they feel satisfied with their answer and believe that no one could dispute such a claim, no one can challenge their authority on this.

But Jesus looks at them and begins to probe, asking, *How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord? Adding that if David calls him Lord, how can he be his Son?*

Jesus' question is a riddle for which no one seems to have an answer. But we who know these things can feel a sense of satisfaction knowing that although Jesus was of the lineage of David and therefore his Son and as a result a candidate for the Messiah, it is also true that Jesus is the Son of God and therefore Lord, that he is the *author* of creation. The Pharisees did not know Jesus to be the Son of God. They did not know him to be Lord. They probably did not know him to be of the lineage of David. They certainly did not understand him to be the Messiah. They did not know much about him. They absolutely rejected his authority. All they really knew was that this man was a threat to their way of life, that he was smart, that he was beloved by many, that his ministry was great and his teaching beyond the abilities of most of them. And so they became silent and dared ask him no more questions.

Does that mean that Jesus won the day? Perhaps. But Jesus had not yet won the battle, for these same men with their cohorts would end up fighting dirty in order to have Jesus removed—permanently they thought—from their lives. Funny thing is, in doing so—in crucifying him--they made it possible for Jesus to be alive and present to each and every one of us every day. It gave Jesus the authority over our lives in a way no one then might have suspected. It showed us that what love requires goes beyond the law to living into that love—that love of God and of neighbor—and, yes, even of self.

Once Moses stood on a mountain after a long journey and could see the promise of land and progeny once given to Abraham coming true from north to south and west to east. He turned over his authority which continued in various ways until it was lost and the people began to look for it to be found in a Messiah who would come once more to save them. And the Messiah came, and even though he was challenged through life and death, he gathered up that authority so that he could proclaim his truth of what love requires: love God with all your heart and soul and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.