
Questioning Authority

Matthew 21:23-32

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery on September 28, 2014 at Duke University Chapel

The courtroom gavel on the desk of a judge represents the authority of a judge on their home turf, the courtroom. On the bulletin cover this week, the gavel sits on the desk without a hand on it to lift it up and bring it down to acoustically pronounce that court is now in session. If no one lifts the gavel, a sign of authority in that setting, procedural justice will not occur because there will be no order and no control. Someone has to take a hold of the gavel to wield authority in that space. But the bulletin image shows a gavel in a courtroom with no one there, raising the question, "Who has authority?" Or, in our postmodern era, where it is a cultural fad to question authority and where skepticism is sacred, perhaps it demonstrates that no one is really in charge and no one really has authority or should. In this era, everything and everyone can be questioned and interrogated. Traditional foundations of modernity have been shaken and are shaking thus we are in a post-age—postmodern, post-Christian, post-Constantinian, postcolonial, post-denominational, post-industrialized, post-a perpetually losing Duke football team. Post-everything thus in this cultural cacophony of questioning one can't help but ask like Pilate to Jesus, "What is truth?" Apparently there is no authority on this question.

This is a very different age than when we were told never to question authority. If I asked my father, "Why?" in response to some instruction, his response of "Because I said so" was supposed to be sufficient without question. And believe me, with his hurricane-sounding-James Earl Jones-fused-with-Charlton Heston-like voice of an Old Testament prophet, I had no desire to question him and then as a result experience "weeping and gnashing of teeth" or a fiery whipping on my gluteus maximus muscles. I dutifully obeyed because I didn't want to see my last days on earth prematurely when the sun turned into darkness and the moon into blood. Times have changed. Authority is not viewed as fixed or necessarily stable; it is malleable and many have misgivings about those in authority.

There are viable reasons for this. Not all people in authority historically have had the best interest of others in mind. Think of 20th century dictators who brutalized their own citizens. Leaders who come to power after liberation movements to liberate a land and their own people but then when in power do the very same oppressive things that were in place before they took power. Authority has been taken by force many times, not given, and enforced through military might. Even in our day, there are questions about the authority of the police in Durham and in places like Ferguson, MO. There's a mistrust of authority or of the authorities. There exists, what we call in theological education, "a hermeneutics of suspicion."

The 1960s with its countercultural movements, I hear was a turbulent time; I wasn't there. I was 0 years of age. But I know that it was a serious time of questioning authority. During that period, French literary critic, Roland Barthes wrote an essay, "The Death of the Author." He basically called for a shift from the authority of the author to the authority of the readers or what could be called "reader response." With this view, the meaning of a book rests with the readers, not with a single author. The author is not the final authority on whatever subject and the meaning of the written text. The author can't control the meaning of a work. As Barthes says, "the death of the author is the birth of the reader." Authority shifts to the many others, the readers in this case, and away from a sole author or authority. Meaning is up for grabs.

Everything is up for grabs, even privacy. What we have today is an established hacker cultural haven where emails, websites, bank accounts, iPhones, anything, can be hacked because there's a disrespect for

authority and many feel that they have the authority to get information and share it with anyone. No one seems to be in charge. And at the same time, those who smell any bit of anti-authoritarianism and condoning of hacker culture and advocacy of questioning authority may attempt to shut it down. Recently, a Pensacola, Florida high school principal cancelled his school's summer reading program over the inclusion of *Little Brother*, a young adult sci-fi dystopia about teens rebelling against government surveillance.

Questioning authority in whatever form is a contemporary fixture in society. The church is not immune from interrogation. As a minister at a wedding, I may say, "by the authority invested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife," but what we see is clerical authority also being questioned. Preachers in churches are, as Fred Craddock writes, "as one without authority." He claims that we are in the shadows as the Church now exists in a shifting culture that once was a supportive scaffolding. Clergy scandals haven't helped the strong winds of suspicion to stop. Churches are sometimes viewed as anachronistic and preaching "a marginal annoyance" (John Killinger). Firm periods of bygone years have become tentative commas and exclamation points have morphed into hesitant questions.

Not even Jesus is off the hook. There are those who ask us like the psalmist, "Where is your God?" The one who rose from the dead, caused blind eyes to see, made the lame to walk, fed the hungry. The one who calmed the stormy seas and walked on water. Where is this Son of God doing this today? Jesus is in question in our world. Questioning is a part of our Christian linguistic arsenal. The lament psalms question God too. Why do the nations rage and kings plot vain things? How long O Lord? How long will you hide your face from me? My God, my God why have you forsaken me? God can be interrogated as a faithful form of worship.

But here the reason Jesus' authority is questioned by the chief priests and elders is not for doxological reasons; they question him because they are the ones who assume and believe that they have the ultimate authority and control over religious systems. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" "These things" refer back to what Jesus did earlier in the temple, which is their current location. Earlier, he "drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves." Then he healed the blind and the lame and taught in the temple. "Who gave you this authority?" When Jesus cleanses the temple by overturning tables, he's overturning restrictive rules that maintain the status quo for the religious, economic, and political elite while blocking others from gaining access to God's house and gifts. Jesus cleans God's house and establishes a new way and new rules, emptying it to make room at the holy table of God for the most despised and rejected of the day. Jesus turns this religious and political economy inside out and upside down.

Those in power, those whose daily musical mantra is "I've got the power!" are not happy and earlier we're told that they were angry. "Who gave you this authority?" They didn't and Jesus was messing with them and their status and role in society. His authority was outside the control of their religious order. What he was doing did not fit into their instructional booklet on temple protocol and leadership. There was no road map for his spiritual revolution. He had cut through their religious red tape and bureaucracy to usher in the kingdom of God because bureaucracy can get in the way of God and God's will. I know the Presbyterians here know what I'm talking about—to have a committee meeting to talk about the last committee meeting where we talked about the last committee meeting. All those meetings but still no ministry being done. One person notes that "Appeals to authority presume the legitimacy of existing systems and leaders. Such appeals have been used for millennia to silence, in particular, the voices of people who are not beneficiaries of established practice or policies" (Noelle Damico). They question Jesus because they have grave concerns that what they have established, what they know, is melting away.

And just when they think they have Jesus in a corner, Jesus answers the question with a question. I took this same approach in my middle school science class. One afternoon, my middle school science teacher,

who shall remain unnamed, was trying to get the class's attention during her lesson and for some reason, many of us were talking to each other while she wanted us to read the textbook aloud as a class. I was talking to my friend seated next to me at our desk. And out of the blue, my teacher yells out to me sarcastically, "Luke, Can you read?" I quickly responded like a well-behaved PK, preacher's kid, with my own question, "Can you teach?!" I wouldn't recommend doing that students but I survived the aftermath to tell you the story today.

We aren't the only ones dishing out questions; Jesus has his own questions for us. The chief priests and elders are questioned by Jesus and all they have to say is, "We do not know." They try to avoid getting caught with their answers but what they say is actually the truth. They don't know. They don't really understand.

They don't know that religious structures and traditions don't always translate into healing and right relationships with others. They don't know that orthodoxy does not necessarily mean just orthopraxy. They don't know that one can think rightly and act wrongly therefore dogma is not a thermometer for your spirituality. They don't recognize that theological training doesn't guarantee a life of obedience and if doctrine destroys people, there's not an inkling of God in it. In the authoritative presence of Jesus, they come to the realization that they don't know everything. In his presence, their whole way of life is questioned. Not knowing can be unsettling and anxiety-creating because we want to have all the answers but what they don't know until Jesus tells them a parable of two sons is that the nature of the kingdom is bigger than they ever imagined. The religious authority figures are the ones whom Jesus has the hardest time changing their minds because the nature, use, and purpose of their authority is called into question. His authority confronts our own claims to authority.

How do we use our authority and what is its purpose? Do we use it to keep people out or do we use it to bring people in? Do we use it to reign tyranny or to dominate or do we use it to open hospitable spaces for sharing and mutual learning to occur? Do we use it to amass power, wealth, and prestige or do we use it to give all of those things away? The way Jesus wields authority is an indictment against the religious and political powers he faces. After he tells the parable of the two sons, he tells the powers that be that "tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." The outcasts get it but somehow the religious bureaucrats don't. Jesus uses his authority to reshape a religious system such that others are included who were excluded. And he reveals the kaleidoscope nature of the kingdom of God. He sets the parameters for kingdom citizenship.

Tax collectors and prostitutes are not major donors to churches; they don't have a special pew with their name on it. They aren't the advertised leaders of a congregation. They aren't the powerbrokers around decision-making tables. Megachurches don't market their ministries with pictures of tax collectors and prostitutes. Both are culturally despised and grouped with sinners yet Jesus has meals with them (9:10-11) and even chooses a tax collector to be one of his twelve disciples (10:3). One chapter later we hear a king inviting people, "the good and the bad," (22:10) from the street to a wedding banquet. The wideness of God's mercy cannot be constricted nor controlled nor tamed nor managed. We don't have to protect God from fringe groups. Jesus was a fringe figure himself on the margins—these fringe folk were his people and represent the makeup of the kingdom. The ones least expected to understand, understand, while the religious authorities use rhetoric of obedience, as the parable suggests, without an ethic of discipleship practice.

A man was sitting in his Queen Anne's chair reading the newspaper in the presence of his best friend, his dog. His fluffy dog disappeared for a while and then returned standing boldly and wearing a T-shirt that said "question authority." The man looked at his hairy friend and said, "I suppose this means that you won't be fetching my slippers anymore." I suppose Jesus that I need to recognize that I work for you and not the other way around. I suppose I won't be able to define the parameters of the kingdom anymore because God does that. I suppose that I won't always be comfortable with the way you do things but you

didn't call me to be comfortable. I suppose that things have to change. I suppose that God is bigger than my thinking about God. I suppose that I need to reevaluate how I use my authority and power and privilege. I suppose that I need to relinquish my job as a gatekeeper, protecting the system, and extend grace to those on the borderlands of human existence. I suppose that I don't have to maintain the cozy confines of the church, squeezing the socially unacceptable out of the church and the kingdom.

I suppose that I can use my authority to swing the doors of the church wide open in order to create the beloved community and not an elitist clik. I suppose that whatever power I have can be used to help the least, the last, and the left out. I suppose that I can help the last become first because they are the ones going ahead of me into the kingdom. And thank God Jesus doesn't say that they are going without me; just ahead of me.

I suppose Jesus is interrogating us to evaluate how our authority impacts the least of these through our use of power. Jesus aligns himself, not with those finely dressed to the tee, but with those like John the Baptist who wears camel hair and even prostitutes, who remove their clothes for a living. This is a radical conception of authority and power.

I say like Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, "I am personally not very much worried about the reduction in numbers where Christianity...[is] concerned. I am far more concerned about the qualitative factor; what kind of Christianity...are we talking about?" Is it one that is more concerned with religious convention than radical, redemptive reconciliation? Is it one that guards the door like an ecclesiastical port authority and locks the door to keep the poor, colored children and families out of a church as happened 35 miles away from here? Or, is it one that ushers at a swinging door facilitating "in-reach" and outreach, a free flowing pendulum of a chapel without walls? I've said it before and I'll say it again. The church is a hospital for the sick. Every sick person should be in here. That's why I'm here and I'm glad that I'm not alone.

One speaker said recently "Power doesn't [usually] wake up in the morning and say: 'How do I share myself today?'" But power in God's kingdom shares and empties oneself of all hubris and self-importance. At the end of Matthew, Jesus uses his authority to release the power of God for his disciples' ministry in the world, including baptism. The authority of Jesus "is a complete paradox. It does not involve the exercise of power, but the renunciation of power. The source of Jesus' power is not a claim to be god-like, but the very self-emptying of even a plausible claim to equality with God" (David Jacobsen, Robert Kelly). "Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross"(Phil 2). It's a new paradigm of authority. His authority is rooted in his willingness to die. Are you willing to die? That's a question that you can't answer with a question. You have to answer it with your life.