

Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn
“Authority”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, September 27, 2020

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 he 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.

Let us pray. Our gracious and loving God, we pray You may find us receptive to Your word. We pray that we might know the presence of Your Holy Spirit. We pray for Your guidance. We pray that You might find us in Your way and in Your truth. For we pray all of this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

At the end of the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Matthew from which we read, and another portion, after Jesus has proclaimed all of his teachings and his sayings to the crowds in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, the text then reads, "Now, when Jesus had finished saying all of these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes." I think what we can deduct from the reaction of the crowds is that the common people of Jesus' time recognized something very unusual about him. For sure, he didn't have a title. He didn't have a position in governing. He was not a recognized authority in the religious establishment. He had none of these trappings. And yet people were deeply moved. They were astounded by his teaching. And this is what I am guessing. I am guessing that his demeanor, his teachings combined with his actions, and his personality, that all of this elicited from them a deep kind of respect and a willingness to listen. A willingness to listen that felt different to them from the religious teachers and authorities that they knew. He taught them as one who had authority. They were astounded. And he did this even though on the face of it he did not have any title or position of authority at all.

And so, it is that much later in the Gospel of Matthew, we have this scene that we read from our scripture--you see the elders and the chief priest just could not let go of this question of his authority. Why? It doesn't say but most likely they felt like Jesus was a threat of some kind to them, and a threat to their position. And also, they knew enough at this point about this Jesus to know that they were thoroughly offended by him. He broke rules. He did not follow the law of Moses in their minds, at least not in ways they interpreted it. For example, he ate with tax collectors and other assorted sinners. Eating with them indicated some kind of basic equality. Furthermore, he did not condemn the woman caught committing adultery even though they caught her in the very act. He did not condemn her. Nor did he properly rebuke the woman that burst into an August dining occasion that was for men

only because that's the way they were in those days--burst into that room--washing and anointing Jesus' feet with oil and wiping his feet from the tears that she shed.

It was a hospitality gesture that the host had deliberately ignored with Jesus. And finally, he did not reject Zaccheus, the tax collector in Jericho. In fact, he chose Zaccheus to sit down at the table with and he sat at the table with Zaccheus with grace. And the result was that Zaccheus agreed on his penance for his tax collecting sins. And Jesus in this gesture sought to restore him to the community of faith. You see, to the elders and the chief priest it was one offensive example building upon many others. And so, they sought in this occasion to trap him, to trap him with their question. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they said. "And just who gave you that authority?" Well, Jesus was not going to be drawn into their trap. So, he told them that he would respond if they first responded to his question, setting his own trap for them. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?," Jesus asked. Well, that put them into such a dilemma that they spent a good bit of time arguing with one another. And, finally, they just kind of shrugged their shoulders and said, "We don't know." They were fearful of the crowd. That ended that part of the discussion.

But here's the thing, it seems to me that what people sensed in Jesus when they were astounded at his teaching, was an inner integrity, a deep-seated moral compass and a very strong sense of empathy, a strong sense of empathy that seemed to be in tune with the divine, with God, in their minds. I know that we say that Jesus was fully divine, but he was also fully human. And this kind of integrity is not easily attained. It never is. And I suspect it started to become a major part of him after his 40 days of fasting in the wilderness, after his encounter with the powers of evil, after his suffering, 40 days of no food. It became a part of him after these 40 days.

And what he became increasingly sure about was that we were all, everyone, children of God. What he became sure about was the worth of every human being in God's eyes, regardless of our human journey, regardless of our foibles and faults, regardless of who we are. It didn't matter. It didn't matter to him if you were a tax collector. It didn't matter to him if you had been or were a prostitute. It didn't matter to him if you were classified by the society around you as some kind of sinner. It also didn't matter to him if you were one of the chief priests or if you were a scribe. It didn't matter. Every single person was a child of God. It wasn't that there aren't consequences for our bad behavior. Of course, there are consequences. But people responded to him as one who had authority because they then came to deeply respect him. You see, they believed what they saw was that he lived what he taught-- an inner integrity. A strong moral compass in tune with God. A strong sense of empathy.

I had a professor when I was in seminary who in many ways inspired that kind of following among his students. His name was James Muhlenberg. He was one of the professors of the Old Testament when I entered San Francisco Theological Seminary. Previously, he had been at Union Theological Seminary for many years, but he had to retire from that position because Union at that time made you retire when you turned 65. It was, it turned out, their loss, and our gain. But while he was at Union, he taught with two of the greatest theological giants of that time, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. He was not as well known. He didn't publish near as much as those two. But those who were his students testified that he was the finest teacher that they had ever had, and I would have to echo them.

Christian author Frederick Buechner-- maybe, you have read some of his material. Frederick Buechner was a student of his when he was at Union, and he wrote about him in one of his books entitled *Now and Then*. For me and for many of the students that I was with, Buechner wrote, "No one left so powerful and lasting an impression as James

Muhlenberg in his introductory course to the Old Testament." The lecture hall was always packed to hear him. Students brought friends. Friends brought friends. With his body stiff and his knees bent and his arms scarecrowed out far to either side, he did not merely teach the Old Testament. He was the Old Testament. At times he would be heaven, wide-eyed and halting as he named the beasts-- or Eve trembling and afraid in the Garden of Eden. He would be David sobbing his great lament over the death of Saul and over the death of Jonathan. And even at his face uplifted and his eyes aghast, he would be Yahweh, the God of Israel, creating the heavens and the earth. And when he said, "Let there be light," there is no other way of putting it, there was light, great floods of it, in that room that reflected in the faces of the many students and others who were listening to him. For him, the Bible was a holy book, full of hope and promise. And yet, in that class, in another sense, it was a book just like any other book, no less a product of its own time, filled with difficulties and ambiguities and even contradictions. For him, on the one hand, it was to be read with eyes of faith and to the hearts uplifting. But on the other hand, it was also to be read critically and searchingly as anything else.

I can absolutely agree with Frederick Buechner's discussion and description of James Muilenburg. And I remember him as well. I remember him being very demanding when it came to our work for him. In his class, it was important that we exhibit clear-eyed and excellent scholarship in anything we did for him. On his final lecture at Union Seminary, a number of the students from Jewish Theological Seminary, which was across the street from Union, a large number of those students crossed the street and entered into the lecture hall. But before they entered, they took off their shoes and they left them in the corridor in the hall, recalling just as Moses was instructed by God to remove his sandals at the foot of the burning bush because God said, "The ground upon which you are standing is holy ground." Those students removed their shoes. Those students from Jewish Theological Seminary, they removed their shoes to indicate that the ground they were standing upon in that lecture hall with James Muilenburg was holy ground, although of course, he was not Jesus, he was a flawed human being. You only need to ask his wife or his family. Spouses and partners know your flaws. And he would chastise me pretty severely, I think, for saying this. But I can say that he did undoubtedly and unequivocally astound us over and over again. He astounded us, his students. And when he spoke to us, it was with authority, integrity, an inner moral compass, a deep empathy. We can begin, perhaps, to speak with authority not by demanding that those around us listen or respond, not because of our position, not because of power that we might have over others, or title, but we command real authority because we strive as best we can to live what we preach, because we strive as best as we can to exhibit kindness and compassion and forgiveness, and because we strive as best we can to do justice with every fiber of our being, to do justice. In the words of Micah the prophet, those familiar words, "What does God require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God?" Amen.