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“Family Leadership – From Where Does It Come?”

Exodus 17:1 - 7

Matthew 21:28 – 32

Texts: “[Moses] called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” . . . Exodus 17:7

And [Jesus] said to them (the chief priests and elders of the temple), “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” . . . Matthew 21:27b

While I was serving the Lexington United Methodist Church back in the 1980’s I was deep in sermon preparation when there was a knock on my office door. It was an official looking person, all dressed up in a dark suit. “Salesman” was my first thought.

That thought vanished very quickly when he reached into his suit and pulled out a badge, and said, “Rev. Myers, I am from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.” He said his name, but I scarce remembered it. It was an experience right out of *Dragnet* with Joe Friday.

I’d like to tell you that I very carefully examined his ID before admitting him into my office. But the truth was, I was so shook up by what he had told me that I merely glanced at it before inviting him to take a seat. Let’s face it, when the F.B.I. drops by for an unannounced visit, your anxiety level shoots up a notch or two. At least mine does.

Well, it turns out that the meeting was quite innocent – a church member had applied for a job with the federal government that required a security check and had given my name as a reference. The man from the F.B.I. asked me a few routine questions about him and then left. After he had gone, I took a deep breath and went “Whew!!!”

And then I thought about what had happened. Am I ever a sucker for authority! The same thing happens to me when I am pulled over by a policeman – and even before I know what it is all about. My knees turn to jelly and I do not think clearly. I may not like either the authority or my reaction to it, but I do defer to it; and sometimes even tremble before it. But after the encounter with authority takes place; I often feel I have both short-changed myself and the person in authority, for I have so acquiesced that I have not thought clearly as I might otherwise done.

Like the second son in the Parable of the man who had two sons, I say “yes”, but then when given some emotional space to think it over, I do not do it. Like, I mean, if it was a warning for driving too fast, I slow down – for a while. But many of you folks know what the New Jersey turnpike is like, . . .

Authority is a tough issue; even in a family. One of the definitions of authority is that it is something given or bestowed on a person. And we all know how that works. A new pastor comes to Chevy Chase UMC – appointed by the Bishop. He or she comes

with the “authority of the church”, properly credentialed, perhaps with a nice resume. Yet if he or she messes with some of the cherished traditions; well, what good is all that “authority?” There is no power in the United Methodist Church that will give me that authority; and given today’s culture; being appointed instead of being “called” by the church it may even increase the skepticism.

Or, you have a boss who has authority “over you”; you report to that boss. But deep down you know that you know more than your boss, and you can do the job more efficiently, and more effectively. So just how much authority do you “give” the boss?

Or perhaps you’re in a family. One or both of the parents is the authority. It is clear from your perspective that others in the family have more wisdom, a better perspective on what the family needs. But, “as it was in the beginning, is now . . .” that person wields the authority and makes the decisions. Aww . . . the perils of adolescence and young adulthood and learning how best to leave the nest.

Both our Scriptures today involve authority and how we respond to it. Let’s look first at today’s Gospel Lesson.

And when Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and elders came up 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 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?”

That’s a curious answer, don’t you think? In fact, it’s not an answer at all – it’s a question. And I hate it when my kids answer me with another question.

At first glance, what Jesus does looks like a clever evasion, a savvy political maneuver to dodge a question Jesus prefers not to answer. Surely Jesus sensed that His interrogators hoped to put Him on the spot. They did not want to know the truth about Him. Their motivation was only to discredit Him.

So Jesus engaged His interrogators in a form of debate common in His day, a series of questions and counter-questions that would eventually establish the truth about the matter. This kind of debate held an honored place in Jewish tradition. It still does.

However, the question about the authority of John the Baptist caught them off guard.

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.”

And then Jesus followed up with another question in the form of a parable about a man who had two sons.

It's time to sing. I'm going to ask Henry/Linda to play a familiar little ditty ("Tell Me the Stories of Jesus"). The words for us to sing are printed on the insert in your bulletin (on the screen).

One day a man who had two sons
Said unto one
"Work in the fields with the farmhands
'Til day is done."
"Yes", said the younger, "I will comply"
But he did not go. The day went by.

Likewise the farmer requested His other son
"No", said the boy, "I have errands
That I must run."
Soon he repented; gave of his skill.
Which son performed, then, their father's will?

"Now", Jesus asked the chief priests and elder, "which son did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." (The song had the order mixed for poetic reasons.) 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."

While the chief priests and elders recognized that the first son originally rebelled against the authority of the father who ordered him to work in the vineyard, he eventually consented. The other son yes, but never did the work of the father. Jesus, with this story is telling the religious leaders that they, by their actions, are saying "Yes" to God, but like the second son, are not doing God's will and not doing the work of the father.

How do you suppose Jesus' interrogators reacted to those words? Moments before Jesus turned the tables on them with his answer that wasn't an answer at all but instead a question; and now, as if to rub salt into the wound, he insults them directly by publicly saying that they are not doing the will of God. And to compound it, how dare Jesus say to these properly credentialed, authority-certified church leaders that the despised tax collectors and immoral prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of Heaven ahead of them?

I don't think I need to answer.

My suspicion is that Jesus understands something that the church of that day – and I dare say the church of this day as well – does not understand; and that is the true nature of authority.

Let me try to unpack that. The Old Testament reading today was about another rather famous religious figure – a guy named Moses, who was like the first son in the parable Jesus told of the two sons. You may recall that when God initially called Moses

at the burning bush (Exodus 3), Moses said “No!” I can’t talk, I am not eloquent.. After some significant give and take, Moses decided to do as God had suggested.

The passage from Exodus _____ read this morning reports of the many struggles the Israelites had on their 40 year sojourn from Egypt to Israel. The Egyptians had enslaved the Israelites for many years; and finally Moses came with the authority of God to free the slaves from the Pharaoh. And the Israelites escaped. They were ecstatic. That is, until they discovered they weren’t exactly on the Acela Express train to Israel. Forty long years they wandered – almost aimlessly – in the Sinai desert; people died and new generations were born. It was long and it was very, very difficult. Leadership was called into question. After all, how could God put someone like Moses in authority when he couldn’t get them into the promised land (today a car ride of about 5 – 6 hours).

During those 40 long years they ran out of food and grumbled against Moses and God. God responded and gave Moses the ability to give them manna to satisfy their hunger. And today we read that they ran out of water. And they quarreled with Moses. Actually when you read the whole account in Exodus, I think “quarreled” is a far too gentle word. They were furious. They probably asked questions like – has Moses lost his touch? Did his connection with God get disconnected? How can we get a new leader – perhaps even someone with a compass? In fact they said, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Moses, like most religious leaders, wasn’t insensitive to their criticism, and he cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” But God was not finished. God had something else in mind. As Gracie Allen once said, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” You see, the freedom and ability Moses had to be able to argue with and cry out to God allows him to think it through. And the more he thinks, the more he realizes what he can do. His belief in his own capabilities and in the rightness of the cause is changed. And God provided Moses with the means to provide safe drinking water to the nomadic people. What Moses **thought** was a period, turned out to be a comma.

Later on in Jesus own ministry we see this happen even to Jesus – under the most dramatic of circumstances. It was his agonizing prayers at the Garden of Gethsemane after the Last Supper and just before His crucifixion. You remember the words, “If it be Your will, O God, please let this cup pass from Me.” But then He responded, “Not My will, but Thine be done.”

If Moses and Jesus could first say “No” to a call from God, then we shouldn’t feel so bad when our first response to calls to the resistance against leadership is “Lord, what am I going to do?” Or, “Please Lord, take this cup away from Me.” Or, as in today’s Gospel Lesson eventually saying “Yes” by way of having said “No!” first. “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” That’s fine! – it is getting to the “Yes” that really matters. It’s being able to act – even after sorting out your resistance – that really matters.

Remember when Jesus asked the religious authorities about John’s authority and they said, “We do not know.” Then Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by authority I am doing these things?” As the Rev. Dr. Paul Deats, my former social ethics

professor, preached at an ordination sermon, “True authority is never imposed on others, rather it is given.” Like trust, perhaps it is even bestowed. The only way that the religious leaders would recognize Jesus’ authority was **for them** to give it to Him. And I think that’s why Jesus did not tell them He was given authority by God. And it is why He told them the parable of the Vineyard owner with two sons. It was only the first son who first said, “No!” then relented and thus honored his father’s authority.

And, getting back to the appointment of pastors by the United Methodist Church – this pastor in particular; if I am to have authority in this congregation, it will come in the form of a gift from you; not as an appointment by the Bishop.

There is plenty to do in God’s kingdom – and even at this small corner of God’s Kingdom – or should I say, God’s family? – called Chevy Chase United Methodist Church. And our first impulse may be to say “No!” when asked to help contribute to the work that needs to be done. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps it is simply a matter of your struggling with God’s Spirit deciding on just how much that particular work needs to get done – simply a matter of you deciding whether or not the church is in line with God’s authority, and whether or not you are capable of doing it. You see, ultimately it is only as we decide together, guided by the Holy Spirit, that indeed, that we can come to a “Yes!” to God’s claim and call on our lives. And when we do reach the “Yes!” that is when God’s work – and God’s vision for Chevy Chase UMC – our church family – will truly be carried out!

The wandering Israelites asked “Is the Lord among us or not?” The chief priests and elders asked Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, and Who gave you this authority?”

Well, a father has two sons: he goes to both of them and tells them (note: he does not ask them) to go and work in the vineyard. The first says “No!” but later changes his mind and goes and does so. The second immediately says, “I go, sir.” But he did not go.

And Jesus asks the chief priests and elders of the temple, “Which of the two did the will of his father?”

It’s all about authority – in a family, in a church, in the world. It’s all about what you bestow upon one another to help get God’s work done in this vineyard called family. Or perhaps, to directly answer the questions the Israelites asked, “is the Lord among us or not?” Might Jesus continue the questioning with, “Do you see God’s work among you in the presence of your family?”