

Exodus 17:1-7 ~ Matthew 21:23-32

By What Authority?

17th Sunday after Pentecost

September 27, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Gospel Text:

“By what authority are you doing these things?” is how today’s gospel text begins. “These things” the chief priests and elders were referring to, were the astounding events of the prior twenty-four hours: Jesus’ final entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, with the flash mob shouting “Hosanna”; followed immediately by the ruckus in the temple, where Jesus drove out the sellers and buyers, and turned over the tables of the money changers; that followed immediately with a major healing display, still in the temple were the blind and the lame began seeing and walking again. Wow! Can you imagine the talk the next day?

That’s where today’s story begins: the *next* day, when Jesus entered the temple on Monday morning and started up, now teaching right there in the temple. Those in power were getting very nervous. Obviously, this Jesus has some kind of power working for him. Look at how the crowds were clamoring after him. But what was he? A rabbi? A prophet? Was he with them or against them? They were not quite sure. But they were determined to find out. Determined to get things back under control. Back in order.

Today we will hear just the first portion of this verbal smackdown in the Temple. It’s another test and another quarrel, this time not between thirsty, scared Israelites versus Moses and God. Today’s test is between upstart rabble rousing Jesus and the religious and political elite who represent the power structure--a partnership between Rome and the religious leaders. The question of the week, “Who is this?” had the whole city in turmoil, as Matthew wrote in 21:10. Those in power, who had the system working for them, were especially suspicious and nervous. They were ready to get to the bottom of it. You’d best settle into this scene. This is a long day in the temple, today’s lesson is only the first of five controversy stories. We will be here with Jesus and this verbal debate in the temple not only today, but throughout the month of October.

You may have been hoping to get a break from controversy and political conflict as we worship together. “Why can’t we just talk about Jesus and his love?” That is exactly what we are doing. It was Jesus and his love that led him to this spot, and would lead him to the cross by the end of the week. Jesus was political. But here’s the good news: Jesus’ truth, Jesus’ authority transcends partisan politics and pet ideologies. The Love of Jesus even transcends the bounds of Christianity. As we listen for Jesus’ truth, the truth that can settle the troubled waters of our souls, remember what Jesus said to his terrified disciples as he walked toward them on the sea, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Sermon:

Two truths and a lie. Do you know that game? It's a youth group *classic* icebreaker game (meaning we were playing it back when I was a teenager) where you tell two things about you that are true and one that is not and then everybody is supposed to guess which of the two are true, and which one is a lie. Of course, the trick of the game is to come up with a truth about you that others don't already know, and a lie about you that seems believable. In this post-truth culture that we are all swimming in, perhaps this game should become more than entertainment. Deciphering fact from fiction is becoming a life skill that we all need to hone. How do we decide what is true and trustworthy and what is not?

I have two truths and a lie for us today as we consider the question hanging in the air over both of these texts: by what or whose authority do we live and move and have our being? First truth about our current reality: ***We are all being tested***, are we not? Today puts us over the 6-month mark of Sundays since March 15, when we ceased to gather physically together in our sanctuary for Sunday morning worship. On our Christian liturgical calendar, every Sunday has a designation related to the life of Christ and the church: today, as I said in my opening greeting, is the "17th Sunday after Pentecost". But in this pandemic year of 2020, it almost feels like we should add another designation, for today is also the "28th Sunday since our Sanctuary Shutdown". Twenty-Eight Sundays: that's almost a month of Sundays. But *unlike* our liturgical calendar where we know when Christmas and Easter will happen, we do not really know when our pandemic exile will end or when the glorious Sunday of reunion will occur.

Let's talk truth about being tested: We get testy. We quarrel. We complain. Sometimes we say things out loud we might otherwise have kept to ourselves if we weren't so overstressed. And then it can't be unsaid. Little annoyances become full blown fights. We inadvertently hurt the people we love. In this topsy turvy pandemic time of testing, plans we make get disrupted. Pac 10 Football is off, now it's on. School is in session, then someone tests positive and it isn't. Voting by mail is reliable, isn't it?

Add to all of that: election day, November 3, inches closer and closer on the horizon, now with the Honorable (and amazing) Ruth Bader Ginsburg's seat on the Supreme Court in the mix, we may also be suffering to one degree or another from something called "election stress disorder." Have you heard of it? I read recently that, "Symptoms include obsessive refreshing of social media, reading news alerts to anyone who will listen and having a deeply emotional reaction to swing state polling." Steven Stosny, a couple's therapist coined the term during the 2016 campaign.¹ And here we are again four years later, but now add the ongoing pandemic, our summer of racial reckoning, a supreme court nomination in play, and stir. We are being tested. Like the testy Israelites at Horeb, we may ask [more likely just to ourselves, we are stalwart Wisconsinites, after all] "Is the Lord among us or not?"

One other truth about being tested: As much as we detest being tested, through this testing, God grows us, (sometimes kicking and screaming) and changes us for the better. In the wilderness is where we discover whom or what we really worship. In the heat of the test something starts to crack open in our way of seeing and understanding that wouldn't have

otherwise. This kind of truth seems to only happen when we are stressed and stricken; when we start to question what we thought we knew was rock solid. We start to see that just maybe that thing we thought was true because we heard it or read it somewhere, wasn't really of God. In that tectonic shift comes an opening, where God takes can lead us into a new and deeper truth.

*Now for the second truth: **God is more with us than we can possibly know or understand.*** "Is the Lord among us or not?" we find it like a golden nugget hidden in the Hebrew word translated as "among us" it literally means "in our inner organs," or to broaden that out Is the Lord "in our parched throats, our cramping muscles, our racing hearts" or not? The water gushing from the rock was their answer, YES, the Lord is with us, right here, absolutely. But to trust that authority they needed something they could see and touch and swallow. They needed to experience the presence of God in their guts and gullets to combat their crisis of confidence and trust. All the way back in our original formation story of the Exodus, 1200 years before Jesus would enter the Temple in Jerusalem for the last time, 1200 years before what he said and did led him to his political execution on a cross. Jesus, Immanuel, God-with-us, no longer only standing on the rock of Horeb in front of Moses, but suffering physical and emotional pain and utter abandonment beyond anything we can imagine or understand. Two truths: Yes, we are being tested, and Yes, God is with us in the crisis, teaching us truth we would never learn otherwise.

*Now for the lie: **No one and nothing changes, so why should we even try?*** Jesus' response to the questioning from the chief priests and elders, exposes this lie from several angles. Today's angle is round 1. Jesus starts with the soil of common ground by taking up the question of John the Baptist's authority, since his reputation is well established already. All regarded John as a prophet. A shared truth. From there, he tells a story about a father with a son who says no but changes his mind and does go work; and the other son who says yes, but doesn't go. Jesus is teaching them and us: It's not so much about where we start, *it's about letting God change us*, into fearless, active participants in the work of loving God and neighbor. Again and again, especially in Matthew, Jesus throws down a call to action. "I was hungry and you gave me food...just as you DID it to the least of these, you did it to me." And then his last words at the end of Matthew, "All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me, GO therefore." Fearless discipleship doesn't worry about what the crowd will think. Fearless discipleship doesn't let tradition restrain the spirit; Fearless discipleship doesn't get suffocated by systemic lethargy and its resistance to change. Fearless discipleship throws down the gauntlet and goes where Christ sends us.

What about us? Where are we in this story? The truth of the matter is that we are more like the chief priests and the elders in the story, the church people, than we are the tax collectors and the prostitutes who jumped first at the chance to change and become fearless disciples of Christ's love and justice. Jesus is saying here every convert matters. Every person is invited to change for the better of the kingdom of God. And every person, every church can do something. Even in the very midst of this pandemic. Today we have the CROP walk. Did you know this community-wide project began in 1947 when farmers were asked to donate food and seed crops to our hungry neighbors in post-World War II Europe and Asia, a program that soon became

known as the Christian Rural Overseas Program – CROP. The money raised goes to help communities around the globe through just and sustainable responses to hunger, poverty, displacement and disaster. You can walk, you can sponsor a walker. You can jump into action, as Jesus is calling us to do.

This Tuesday, our new Creating Connections Team will meet for the first time by Zoom to share creative ideas of how to build our FPC community in new ways this fall, while staying safe. New ways to love one another as Jesus loves us. The testing we are enduring, now 28 Sundays since we worshipped here in the sanctuary, will call forth community building like we never had before. Next Sunday, be a peacemaker by contributing to the Peace and Global witness offering which Dan Crump will tell you more about shortly. You can do something to help tackle the HIV AIDS crisis in Malawi, just one example of how these funds are used globally.

The problems we face obviously won't be solved quickly. The disparities and disunity that are crippling our land will not be healed right away. Our minds and hearts are changed slowly. Like Jesus teaches, change calls for patience and the long game. With his adversaries he started with a short parable and John the Baptist as their reference point. Stay tuned to see where he goes from there. We can take a page from Green Bay Packers Coach Matt LaFleur's playbook. He is taking Davante Adams' hamstring injury seriously and so doubted he would put him in the lineup for today's game against the Saints. Even though they need him in this game. Coach LaFleur is looking past today and thinking about the good of the team for the whole season and on into the playoffs.

Jesus is with us today, and calling us to let him lead us past today by jumping into action with both feet now. Let us defy the lie, that we can't do anything. Let us defy the lie that no one and nothing changes. That is *not* the gospel truth that we live by. Is it?

ⁱ Lisa Lerer, *New York Times*, Sept. 24, 2020, On Politics